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“IT’S NO SECRET”: THE EXPERIENCES OF EIGHT LESBIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL  
ADMINISTRATORS WITH DISTRICT PERSONNEL, STUDENTS AND THEIR  
PARENTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

*“...These questions are always hard to answer because when you’re living gay, you don’t know which decisions you’re making because you’re gay or because you’re living” (Adrian 596 – 598).*

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the ways lesbian school administrators in K-12 public schools answer questions about their sexuality from students and their parents and how their feelings, experiences and this partial or potential closet affect their leadership. I completed a series of three in depth interviews with eight European American school administrators that identify as lesbian. I begin by sharing a snapshot of the participants’ experiences with coming out to family, friends and district personnel. I found, that while all participants considered themselves implicitly or explicitly out with district personnel, their timeframes for disclosure varied and were influenced by seven common factors. All but one participant positioned themselves as closeted with students and their parents; there were six themes found in their responses to students and their parents and factors affecting their choices regarding revealing their lesbian identity. Participants’ positioning on the out continuum with district personnel and with students and their parents affected their leadership as school administrators.

## Acknowledgments

When I began this life changing journey, there was light but just a speck at the end of the tunnel. Many times, the light was fleeting and I was uncertain about presence at all, but family and friends never let me lose sight and pushed me to keep moving in that direction. The list of supporters is long, too long for this space, yet appreciated beyond words.

To my partner, Jen, the love of my life, I dedicate this work. She spent countless hours next to me in our favorite study space, Mokabe's, processing to the point of having nothing left to say. As I spent the year consumed with my thoughts, never far from the participants or my findings, she patiently waited, never complaining, always my biggest supporter. She also knows all too well the struggles and triumphs of being a lesbian school administrator.

I would like to thank my parents, siblings, grandparents and friends for their unyielding support from the time I began the program through the dissertation defense. I would especially like to thank my Grandpa for his genuine interest in my education and for pushing me to continue without even knowing it. He cultivated the high expectations in our family for education - expectations maintained by my parents. There was never a time when I spoke with my Grandpa on the phone or face to face that he did not ask about my school work, more specifically my research. At times, when I wanted to give up, I could hear his voice in my head challenging me to battle through. At times, I continued because I would never want to disappoint him.

The support I received from my committee, Dr. Matthew Davis, Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West, Dr. Carl Hoagland, and Dr. Jason Heisserer was amazing. There is

always a risk when one tackles queer issues in academia, but their courageous support endured. Words cannot capture my feelings of gratitude for my advisor, Dr. Matthew Davis, who knew I was going to write a dissertation exploring the experiences of queer administrators long before I did. Matthew is a true ally and friend who understands the importance of exploring queer issues in education; always willing to support my work, believing in me when I did not believe in myself, pushing me when I thought I would break.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Personal Orientation

I am *out* at school explicitly; I have been for eight years. By *out*, I mean that I have few fears about disclosing my sexual identity as a lesbian to the staff I supervise, to my colleagues, or to my boss. My office is decorated with pictures of my partner; I talk and others ask about our time together outside of school. While discussing my sexual orientation with staff has not been difficult, coming out and being out to students and their parents remains a painful challenge for me. Consequently, my lesbian identity informs my professional identity every day: I respond uneasily to inquiries from students about my sexuality; I scrutinize carefully my haircut and clothing in order not to cross the invisible, fine line of being too “butch” (Levitt & Horne, 2002). In many subtle yet excruciating ways, even though I want to be “out and proud,” I struggle to be “The Right Kind of Queer” (Tooms, 2006).<sup>1</sup> My experiences are similar to the experiences of Tooms’ (2006) participants, only with my students, not adults. Every time a student admires the ring I wear on the fourth finger of my left hand, asks me who gave it to me, and I reply “a friend,” my heart aches. A small piece of that *out and proud queer* administrator wears away, and I feel ashamed. Not of being a lesbian, but of not being strong enough to say that I am one when it counts, when others, maybe even the inquiring student, need me to have the courage to say it.

---

<sup>1</sup> In using the word *queer*, I am participating consciously in the appropriation of a formerly derogatory term that is now used counterhegemonically by in-group members. In the Definition of Terms below, I will expand on the history of the usage of the word *queer* as a signifier of those in a particular group by those both inside and outside that group.

As I look toward a future where queer educators can live, love and work openly without fear or shame, I see an opportunity to expand on the limited research literature that is available. In this study, I offered a venue for closeted lesbian administrators to safely share their experiences in hopes that they will feel empowered to live out and proud. Furthermore, I viewed this inquiry as an opportunity to further understand and share why these lesbian administrators do not feel part of an institution that should support and celebrate who they are. With the hope of transforming our heteronormative public schools, I have endeavored to give *out* lesbian administrators a forum to share their experiences of coming out in order to provide hope and empowerment for others not quite ready (Evans, 1999).

Through my research, I have found a community of other lesbian school administrators who share my struggles with living explicitly out in all aspects of my life, especially with students and their parents. Through this experience, my feelings of fear and agonizing apprehension were validated as common. I also realized that in many ways, my anxiousness is a result of internalized messages applied to the “what if” game I play in my head. Through my conversations with my participants and while comparing their experiences with mine, I have gained an awareness that many times we closet ourselves even though the signals of support and alliances are visible and intentional. For so many of us, the potential for a negative reaction over shadows the numerous personal examples of acceptance in our professional lives; a personal battle we fight every day. While through this process, I have found my voice and feel more confident about answering inquiries from students and their parents; I still struggle to find the strength and the courage to live explicitly out with students and their parents.

### Situated in the Scholarship

The ground-breaking scholarship exploring queer educational leadership, while still new, offers many areas for further research. For queer practitioners and scholars like me, as we read the research literature and apply it to our own experiences, strong emotions surface and still further questions arise. Koschoreck (2003), Fraynd and Capper (2003), Tooms (2006), and Jones-Redmond (2007) have opened a door for us to delve deeper into how our queer identity affects our leadership, how the heteronormative constraints of public education shape our professional identity as queer leaders, and maybe most importantly, how we are personally affected as we try to “fit” into our heterosexist educational institutions (Tooms, 2006).

Recent research examining queer experiences in educational administration indicates that what we have to say matters, our experiences are important, and I cannot help but feel hopeful, even empowered. Yet I proceed cautiously; I am one of the lucky ones. I have spent my entire time in educational administration working with a district that displays an understanding of diversity on several levels: sexual orientation is included in our anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment policies.

### Research and Guiding Questions

In the context of the scholarship that has come before mine, the research questions that guided this study are: How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about their sexual identity from district personnel? How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about sexual identity from students? How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about sexual identity from their parents? And how do their feelings, experiences and this partial or

potential “closet” affect their leadership? These research questions were influenced by current research and several subordinate questions which include: 1) What are the effects of parent and student interactions on the personal and professional identities constructed and represented by lesbian public school administrators? 2) Do the decisions that result from our experiences represent a continuum of barriers to challenging heteronormativity in schools? 3) How do institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia affect these decisions? 4) Are these conversations important for creating queer space in schools? 5) How does internalized heterosexism impact these decisions? 6) What are the factors that inform and shape decisions to come out to some people but not to others in the school? 7) What are the potential and realized risks?

#### Scope of Study

Fraynd and Capper (2003) noted that in 1999, there was no research in the field of education exploring the experiences of queer school administrators. In 1999, researchers began to develop and conduct research in this area but none have focused specifically on lesbian school administrators working with students and families (Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Koschoreck, 2003; Jones-Redmond, 2007; Tooms, 2006). This study focused on building-level lesbian school administrators currently practicing in or retired from urban or suburban public schools in a large, Midwestern metropolitan area. The size of the geographical location from which the sample was taken was limited but necessary because of the sampling method and personal financial constraints. To participate, these individuals identified as lesbian. To locate participants, I used snowball sampling which relies heavily on social networks. While the use of social networks and personal referrals to identify participants is supported in the literature, there are limitations associated with

this type of sampling, specifically around issues of voice. This research reflects the lived experiences of lesbian school administrators that participated in the study; however, we cannot assume their experiences reflect the experiences of all lesbian school administrators.

### Definition of Terms

#### *Queer*

Previously, the term queer was used derogatively to describe homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender individuals. Recently, the term has been reclaimed by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Questioning (LGBTQ) community and some of its allies as an all-inclusive term replacing LGBTQ (Evans, 1999; Tooms, 2006). In literature and research before the 1970s, the term queer was not generally used; more recently, the word has been used by scholars to refer to LGBTQ individuals. In this sense, and with this history informing my own usage, I will rely on the word *queer* in this study both for consistency, and for its political and ideological power.

#### *Gender*

In law and in politics, as in most public discourse, one is either male or female. In law and in politics, sex and gender are used interchangeably as though one means the same as the other (Lugg, 2003). In the queer community and in social justice discourse, generally, sex, gender and sexual orientation hold very different meanings. A person's sex is biological, tied directly to chromosomes (Lugg, 2003). Contrarily, gender is a set of roles and behaviors that individuals are expected to follow of what it means to be male and female as determined by societies and cultural, ethnic, and religious norms (Tooms,

2006). In contemporary society, both sex and gender are viewed as binary; people are expected to identify as male or female and live according to the socially constructed gender roles attached to both without variation. Sexual orientation has little to do with one's sex or gender-identification. According to Lugg (2003), "sexual orientation [is] the sex of the person with whom one can most comfortably establish deep emotional connections— or sexual object choice" (p. 100). For the purposes of this study, sex is biology, gender is performance of identity, and sexual orientation is emotional attachment (Lugg, 2003).

### *The Closet*

Other terms used in this study include lesbian, "the closet," "out," heterosexism and heteronormativity. "The closet" is a term used to describe someone who has not disclosed his or her sexual identity to others. "Out" is a term used to describe queer-identified people who are open about their sexuality in various contexts; in this study I also refer to participants positioning on the out continuum as closeted, implicitly out and explicitly out (Griffen, 1991). Participants are implicitly out when they tell the truth about their lesbian identity without using the words gay or lesbian to describe themselves; they refer to their partner or relationship in conversations and give the audience permission to view them as lesbian (Griffen, 1991). In this study, participants used the terms "open" and "implicitly out" interchangeably. When participants identify as explicitly out, they use the words gay or lesbian to describe their sexual orientation to others; they affirm their sexuality (Griffen, 1991). For participants in this study, the terms "out" and "explicitly out" had the same meaning. Both "closeted" and "out" occur on a continuum: one could be out or closeted in some spaces but not others for a variety of

reasons. The words participants used to share their personal relationships and the choices they made regarding the disclosure of their sexual orientation within the school community which included district personnel, parents, and students constituted their positioning on the out continuum.

### *Homophobia, Heterosexism, Heteronormativity*

Homophobia is “the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (Pharr, 1997, p.1). Internalized homophobia is the internalization of this hatred and negative feelings (Herek, Cogan, Gillis & Glunt, 1997). Heterosexism is “an ideological system that operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels to stigmatize, deny and denigrate any nonheterosexual way of being (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008). Internalized heterosexism is the internalization of these negative attitudes by people who identify as queer (Sophie, 1987). Heteronormativity is the marginalization of non-heterosexual relationships and beliefs that heterosexuality is the “normal” sexual orientation (Evans, 1999).

### *Significance of Study*

Sexuality has had a substantive impact on the shaping of school administration practice throughout the years (Blount, 1996). Schools continue to be heteronormative institutions that have mimicked society’s treatment of queer individuals; law and politics have reinforced this discriminatory treatment (Lugg, 2003). Prior to the twenty-first century, the experiences of queer administrators were absent in the research. Subsequently, some research has focused on the experiences of queer administrators but more research is needed; there is no research on school administrators that specifically explores the experiences of lesbian school administrators. Currently, there are no research

studies that focus specifically on how lesbian school administrators' identities shape their interactions with students and families as well as, ultimately, their leadership.

In the field, there has been recent interest in research on queer issues in education. Thus far, that research has focused on the experiences of queer students and to some extent, queer teachers (Blount, 2005; Griffin, 1991; Sparkes, 1994). But even with the increase in literature on the experiences of queer individuals in schools, the research on educational leadership through the experiences of queer administrators is sparse (Tooms, 2006). "Educational administration and leadership may very well be the final unrecognized and unexamined closet for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT)" (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003, p. 4).

According to Harbeck (1997), when queer issues are discussed relating to education, there is an underlying assumption that all public school administrators are heterosexual. For many, there is still a lack of awareness that queer administrators exist in schools (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003). According to Capper (1999), as of 1999, there was not one published study regarding sexual minority school administrators. In 2003, the *Journal of School Leadership* focused an entire issue on examining why all public school leaders are assumed to be straight, why some queer leaders feel they must pass as straight, and how heteronormativity or assimilation shapes their lives as well as their leadership practice (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003).

The process of conducting this study provided an opportunity to give lesbian administrators a voice to safely share their experiences and potentially empower them to live out and proud. It also provided a vehicle for lesbian administrators in school districts to share their personal experiences and how these experiences impact their work with



students and families. This research could be used as a resource for other lesbian school administrators who are considering coming out or struggling to answer inquiries about their sexuality from students and families. This research also provides all school administrators with insight into ways to combat heteronormativity in schools from the perspective of a group of lesbian school administrators.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Sexuality has played an influential part in the schools and molding educational practices over the years (Blount, 1996). As heteronormative institutions, schools have been places of persecution for queer individuals, both students and district personnel. This oppression has been supported and maintained in law and politics (Lugg, 2003b). Heteronormativity describes the practices of marginalizing non-heterosexual relationships and viewing heterosexuality as the normal or only sexual orientation (Szymanski et al., 2008). Until recently, the experiences of queer administrators have been invisible in the professional research; during the last 10 years, some research has surfaced exploring the day-to-day experiences of queer administrators, and more research is needed. This chapter analyzes the existing research literature on past and current research on queer educators, specifically, queer school administrators in public education.

#### Queer Past in Education

According to Blount (2003), sexuality has been a central force in shaping school administration since its inception in three ways: 1) gender roles in educational professions parallel traditional gender roles in marriage; 2) male dominance in administrative positions traditionally plays out through hypermasculinity, an exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior; and 3) an expectation that school administrators hunt, identify and purge queer educators from the field. Still, the structuring of school administration and schools has taken place with little mention of homosexuality. “In some ways, schools still serve as public extensions of the

heteronormative family” (Blount, 2003, p. 23). According to Blount, there has been very little research done to explore the professional experiences of queer administrators. In addition, “The role of school administration in perpetuating heteronormativity and even homophobia largely has been unquestioned in the scholarly literature in the field” (Blount, 2003, p. 23).

Prior to the 1850s, men dominated the field of teaching until the common school movement created a teacher shortage that could only be addressed by employing single women. As single women entered the field of education, school districts began hiring superintendents to provide oversight and to assume responsibilities previously handled by school boards. Typically, male superintendents were hired to provide governance and manage districts’ financial matters, responsibilities typically given to husbands in marriages. Female teachers were expected to manage the day to day affairs in the classroom, responsibilities typically assigned to wives in marriage. The superintendency was structured to resemble the institution of marriage (Blount, 2003). According to Blount (2003), “Though this arrangement largely concerned preserving idealized gender roles of the time, it was grounded in the socially approved institution for regulating sexuality: marriage” (p. 10).

By the beginning of the 1900s, 70 percent of teachers were officially single, widowed or divorced women. The teaching profession began to be viewed as “women’s work” which resulted in a decrease of both pay and status. According to Blount (2003), throughout this time, school superintendents found ways to show their “hypermasculinity” and the “codes for masculinity became narrower” (p. 11). One of the most common ways to demonstrate their masculinity was through marriage; during this

time, marriage rates of school superintendents were higher than marriage rates in the general workforce. “Marriage, then, had become an important means by which men demonstrated their masculinity, which was especially important for men in women’s work, men whose masculinity and sexuality otherwise might be questioned” (Blount, 2003, p. 13).

Simultaneously in larger society, sodomy laws (which targeted queer individuals) were introduced and expanded. The legal implications and cultural beliefs around homosexuality resulted in difficult times for queer educators during the early 1900s. According to Lugg (2003a), female teachers who married were expected to leave the field immediately to care for their husbands and families. On the other hand, female teachers who chose not to marry were at times considered lesbians and could lose their jobs. Because of the Great Depression, many schools were forced to continue employing older unmarried female teachers. Men who entered the profession at this time typically did so as a stepping stone to a career in administration, a path only marginally accepted for women (Lugg, 2003a).

The legal and cultural atmosphere remained virtually unchanged until World War II. The war brought queers together in the military and in industry. Although still closeted, they were no longer isolated in rural towns and on farms. The result was the development of queer subcultures throughout the United States in urban areas such as San Francisco, San Diego and New York. Within these cities, bars, restaurants and other establishments opened for queer military personnel which fostered community which continued to thrive after the war. Many men and women sought companionship in bars and clubs; others found intimacy in their professional relationships (Lugg, 2003a). “For

both men and women, the new world of gay bars offered a generally safe place and further bolstered their emerging sense of homosexual identity” (D’Emilio & Freedman 1997, p. 290). Many of those remaining in urban centers following the war found employment in education. During World War II, there was a brief period of increased social tolerance, but quickly, following the war, the tolerance was gone and the crackdown began. Queers were considered subversives, like communists, who could be easily blackmailed, because of their so-called weak moral fiber. Because of these attitudes, the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, fired thousands of queer employees from federal, state, municipal and private sector jobs (Lugg, 2003a).

In 1953, President Eisenhower signed Executive Order #10405 barring queer workers from all areas of federal employment because they were considered overwhelming threats to security. This order had several implications for queer people, including increased harassment by law enforcement, witch hunts, an increase in vice squads, regular raids on bars, visits to homes of those perceived to be queer, printing of names, addresses, places of employment in newspapers, felony charges with convictions requiring prison or hospitalization in mental hospitals, and in some cases, confinement to asylums indefinitely without a trial (Lugg, 2003a).

Following this order, during the same period, the Kinsey Reports surfaced (Lugg, 2003a). The Kinsey Reports asserted that sexuality was fluid; people were not entirely heterosexual or homosexual, and homosexual behavior was natural. Instead of shifting the popular view of homosexuality, the reports resulted in an increase in the McCarthy witch hunts, resulting in great risk to public educators. Educators’ licenses were revoked if they were arrested, even if they were not convicted. Utilizing the moral turpitude

clause, tenured and non-tenured teachers were fired if suspected of being queer. In 48 states and Washington DC, queer citizens were considered felons; accusations that resulted in the loss of teaching licenses (Lugg, 2003a).

With the baby boom of the Cold War Era, districts dropped their marriage bans; teachers married to prove their sound morality. The increasing number of schools coupled with the increasing number of female teachers, resulted in a greater need for school administrators. During this time, school administrators were always married men; women taught and men supervised. According to Lugg (2003a), administrators were required to assimilate to professional norms – “male, married, homophobic” (p. 61). During this era, it was the administrator’s responsibility to “[purge] suspected homosexuals from public schools... to ensure their buildings were free from moral taint” (Lugg, 2003a, p. 61). In many places, this homophobic tradition continues today.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC) was responsible for the most significant purge of queer teachers in the history of the United States (Graves, 2007). The committee was originally established to fight the integration of public schools in the state of Florida; but after having little success, the FLIC shifted its focus toward identifying and eliminating queer teachers in the state’s public schools (Graves, 2007). The FLIC used public funds to pay informants, complete undercover investigations, and conduct hearings to fire and strip male and female teachers suspected of being queer of their credentials. Relying on hearsay in most cases and using a definition of homosexual as anyone having any sexual relations with a person of the same sex, the FLIC revoked 64 teacher’s licenses and brought an additional 83 cases to hearing (Graves, 2007).

As a result of the Kinsey Reports, some activists encouraged states to repeal the sodomy laws; Illinois was the only state to do so in 1951. During this time, civil rights movements were having some success for both women and African-Americans, but queer activists were not experiencing the same success until the beginning of the public Gay Rights Movement in the 1960s (Lugg, 2003a). The 1960s began a public fight for queers to be free from persecution and to move toward gaining society's acceptance, a fight that continues today.

The event that publically marks the beginning to the Gay Rights Movement of the 1960s is widely considered the Stonewall Riots. The Stonewall Riots began on June 27, 1969, at a gay bar in Greenwich Village. On this day, the police raided a local gay bar; during the raid, a group of black drag queens fought back. Soon, others joined in the fight: gays, lesbians, transsexuals, bisexuals; many were beaten by police and several cars were smashed. The riots continued for five nights until SWAT responded and a brutal street fight ensued. Out of the riots, a collective voice was found and activist organizations were born, including the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). Both groups were committed to social revolution and spent time picketing media outlets, schools, medical facilities, religious organizations and government while trying to increase day to day visibility (Lugg, 2003a). In addition to picketing, the early activist groups encouraged others to come out, fought to have homosexuality removed from the American Psychiatric Association's manual of mental illnesses (finally removed in 1973), and tried to repeal sodomy laws (Lugg, 2003a).

Despite the attempts of the Gay Rights Movement to improve the political status of queers throughout the country, the climate for educators in public schools remained

hostile (Lugg, 2003a). In 1972, a leader of a gay activist group and teacher was asked to submit to a psychological evaluation by the district; the evaluation found him mentally ill because of his sexual orientation. Because of the evaluation results, he was dismissed by the school board, a decision upheld by Supreme Court in 1979 (Lugg, 2003a). In 1973, a man suspected of being gay was fired for lying on his employment application regarding undergraduate clubs and activities which would have verified his sexual orientation for the district. His dilemma was not unique; lie on an application and get fired or tell the truth on the application and not get hired (Lugg, 2003a). In 1975, another individual was fired because he was a gay man. Some believed his physical presence could lead to the promotion of a queer lifestyle; the district said his presence caused a disruption (Lugg, 2003a). In 1979, a school board learned of a transgender individual's transition and terminated her contract for improper conduct potentially psychologically damaging to students; the courts upheld her termination (Lugg, 2003a). Despite the gains made during the Gay Rights Movement, in the 1970s and 1980s courts were still ruling as though queers were criminals, mentally ill and immoral, which resulted in continued secrecy and passing (Lugg, 2003a).

Despite the success of the Gay Rights Movement, queers were met with vicious attempts to diminish their progress. During the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a movement to restore traditional family values by fundamentalist Christians and social conservatives; homosexuality was seen a threat to Christian values (Lugg, 2003a). In 1977, Anita Bryant of Dade County, Florida, under the guise of protecting children from molestation by homosexuals, successfully fought to repeal the protections for gays and lesbians in housing and in the workplace via ballot initiatives; St. Paul, Eugene, and



Wichita quickly followed (Lugg, 2003a). In April of 1978, Oklahoma banned gay and straight public school employees from publically talking about issues of homosexuality; the courts overturned this ban as a violation of free speech (Lugg, 2003a). The Anita Bryant initiatives started a period of elevated anti-gay rhetoric and policies that included selectively enforcing consensual sodomy laws, enforcing adoptions bans on and stripping custody from LGBTQ parents, banning openly queer personnel from the military, barring same-sex marriage, and limiting non-discrimination laws in workplace and in housing (Lugg, 2003a).

In response to the growing apathy in the late 1970s and 1980s to the plight of queers in America, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was developed. In 1986, the Task Force assisted in attempting to repeal the sodomy laws in Georgia. In the 1986 case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the courts upheld the Georgia's consensual sodomy laws because the language in the law did not apply only to same-sex sodomy, but to all consensual sodomy (Lugg, 2003a). The consensual sodomy laws continued in the United States until 2003 when the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision supported the unconstitutionality of these laws. This Supreme Court decision led to the repeal of consensual sodomy laws throughout the country (FindLaw, 2003). This decision indirectly impacted the lives of queer educators everywhere; no longer could teachers and administrators be stripped of their certification as a result of being charged with consensual sodomy.

During the same time as the repeal of the sodomy laws, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) released their 2003 National Climate Survey. This survey exposed the dismal school climate for queer-identified students. Queer students were targeted in schools and queer adults were unprotected in the workplace. Throughout

the country, only twelve states and Washington DC provided nondiscrimination measures for LGBT employees. In states where nondiscrimination laws were not on the books, some municipalities and school districts provided protection for LGBT employees. Because of the lack of protection, “many gay and lesbian educators [spent] inordinate time concealing their identities for fear of being ‘outed’ and losing their jobs” (French, 2002, p. 66). Workplace protections continued to be minimal. In 2007, at the federal level, House Bill 235-184 was introduced; this bill would provide protection for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in employment. The bill has passed in the House of Representatives but has not yet passed in the Senate. George W. Bush vowed to veto any legislation offering this protection in the workplace. Even in the queer community, this legislation has received a great deal of criticism because of the obvious exclusion of transsexual and transgender employees (CNN, 2008).

### Queer Politics

In law, politics and education, the terms sex and gender are used interchangeably while they have very different meanings (Lugg, 2003b). In the queer community and diversity work, sex and gender have very different definitions. A person’s sex is biologically determined by their chromosomal make-up (Lugg, 2003b). Sex is biology and gender is a set of roles and behaviors determined by societies and cultural, racial, ethnic and religious norms about what it means to be male and female that individuals are expected to follow (Tooms, 2006). A person’s sexuality or sexual orientation is not tied to gender-identification, but rather dependent on the sex of the person one is most deeply emotionally connected in terms of a sexual relationship (Lugg, 2003b).

Within the concepts of sex, gender and sexual orientation, there are differences. Although the law considers people to be only male or female, there are other variations of sex. For example, intersex people have biological characteristics of both males and females. Transsexuals are people who have considered or elected to participate in sexual reassignment surgery (Lugg, 2003b). With regard to gender, transgender individuals identify with the gender roles socially assigned to another sex; a person born with female genitalia who lives her life adhering to gender characteristics typically assigned to someone born with male genitalia and vice versa. Using sex and gender interchangeably in law and politics is problematic. For example, in schools there is legal protection for sex discrimination but not for gender discrimination; one cannot be fired for being male but could be fired for being a male who does not conform to male gender roles (Lugg, 2003b).

Previously, the term queer was used with a negative connotation directed at members of the LGBTQ community. In the last few years, the term queer has been embraced by the LGBTQ community and by social justice advocates to include people with a homosexual, bisexual or questioning orientation, and individuals who are intersex, transgender, or transsexual (Lugg, 2003b). In the literature, queer theory has developed as a branch of critical theory. Queer theories are used to examine the social construction of sexual identity, its multiplicities, its historical construction, and the ways sexuality disrupts and reinforces power relations (Tooms, 2006). According to Lugg (2003b), queer theories make visible the ways “heterosexuality becomes normalized as natural” (p. 102). Queer theories challenge heteronormativity: the notion that the world is non-queer or should be (Lugg, 2003b).

One of the queer theories used to examine queer experiences is Queer Legal Theory (Lugg, 2003b). Queer Legal Theory is dedicated to eliminating the legal and social structures that privilege and enforce heterosexuality, patriarchy, White supremacy, and class advantage by liberating sexual minorities and by questioning the majoritarianism reflected in court decisions, regulations and legislation (Lugg, 2003b). Queer Legal Theory questions the legal and cultural demands of members of a minority groups to assimilate, cover, or pass. Queer Legal Theory is vital to the struggle to end discrimination and to ensure equity in schools because schools are run by the government which is comprised of laws; therefore, it is quite possible that the only way to change the schools is through challenging homophobic and discriminatory laws and regulations. According to Lugg (2003b), "Public schools are governmental entities ruled by laws, regulations, and policies. The people who teach, lead, study, play, and otherwise live within a public school's walls must conform to these dictates or face various legal sanctions including expulsion or job termination. These legal mandates are established through political processes that include court decisions at the state and federal levels" (p. 97). Because of this, one can utilize legal theory to understand these structures (Lugg, 2003b).

### Queer Present in Education

"While our struggles with issues of identity, sexuality, pedagogy, and leadership have been different, each of us has come to an understanding that sexuality matters, whether it is given explicit voice or silenced" (Koschoreck, 2003, p. 30). In Koschoreck's (2003) work, he writes of the importance of sexuality in the delivery of education; he desires to open a space for conversations that would allow for the complexities of

sexuality to inform our vision of education. But according to Tooms (2006), while social justice issues are increasingly at the forefront of topics in education, even in social justice networks, members struggle with thinking and talking about issues affecting the queer community.

Rofes (2000) asserts, “All teachers teach a great deal about sex, whether we acknowledge it or not. What we say and what we don’t say. What is voiced and what is silenced, creates knowledge for our students that contain tremendous implications” (p. 148). In recent years, there has been a push by activists to improve the social climate for queer-identified students in schools across the country. Anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies have surfaced in some school districts in an attempt to protect LGBTQ students in public schools (GLSEN, 2007). The 2007 National School Climate Survey completed by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 73.6 percent of students heard derogatory remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently or often in schools and 44.1 percent of students reported experiencing physical harassment at school based on sexual orientation. In that same report, LGBTQ students reported an increase in feeling a part of their school when their schools had a Gay-Straight Alliance (2007). At the time of the survey, only eleven states and Washington DC had anti-bullying and harassment policies that included sexual orientation. In the study, policies such as these were found to contribute to lower homophobic remarks and verbal harassment (GLSEN 2007). Despite the support for LGBTQ students, queer adults employed by school districts have not benefited from the same support. Currently, there are no federal employment protections for individuals who are or who are perceived to be queer. Those who are protected are typically protected at the state or municipal

level or by local school districts. This lack of protection has implications for LGBTQ teachers and administrators everywhere.

### Literature on Queer Administrators

In the field, there has been an increase in research on queer issues in education. Typically, that research has focused on the experiences of queer students and to some extent, queer teachers. But even with the increase in literature on the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in schools, there has been very little research on educational leadership through the experiences of queer administrators (Tooms, 2006). “Educational administration and leadership may very well be the final unrecognized and unexamined closet for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT)” (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003, p. 4). According to Harbeck (1997), when LGBT issues are discussed relating to education, there is an underlying assumption that all public school administrators are heterosexual. There seems to be a lack of awareness that LGBT administrators exist (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003). According to Capper, as of 1999, there was not one published study regarding sexual minority school administrators (1999). In 2003, the *Journal of School Leadership* focused an entire issue on examining why all public school leaders are assumed to be straight, why some LGBT leaders feel they must pass as straight, and how heteronormativity or assimilation shapes their lives as well as their leadership practice (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003). Since then, Tooms (2006), Koschoreck(2003) and Jones-Redmond (2007) have initiated research on the experiences of queer school administrators.

Tooms explored the ways sexual identity impacts queer administrators in their professional experiences. In her research presented in 2006 and later published, Tooms

asked the question, “How do closeted and semi-closeted educational administrators manage and negotiate the intersections of their personal identity and their professional identity? Are these administrators empowered or constrained by their work?” (Tooms, 2006, p. 3) The purpose of her work was to understand how queer-identified school administrators, historically marginalized by society, moderated and navigated their personal and professional identities (Tooms, 2006). For Tooms (2006), “School administrators are professionally socialized to embrace a heterosexist mind set. Therefore, by seeking to understand how queer administrators negotiate their personal life with the professional life, we are able to learn how one frame of identity, sexual identity, can usurp or dominate others in terms of day to day responsibilities and activities of leaders in the field of education” (p. 3). Tooms’ research also exposed ways in which non-queer colleagues can unintentionally damage their relationships with queer colleagues during their attempts to build professional relationships (2006).

In her study, Tooms (2006) interviewed six European American school administrators, five women and one man, all identified as queer. In the interviews, she asked the participants questions centered around their personal and professional histories including when they first realized they were gay, how they entered education, how they handled their personal lives early in their careers, how they became school leaders, and the choices they made regarding the immersion of their personal lives in their professional lives. Tooms (2006) was specifically interested in the use of identity management strategies – passing, covering, omitting, implying or living out – and the concept of “fit” (p. 8).

One's "fit" is specifically related to the way a school leader manages his or her identity to acclimate to the existing social structure of the school and community. This relationship often impacts the selection of candidates for leadership positions in school districts (Tooms, 2006). For example, applicants are many times selected for positions based on their perceived fit within the organization and their ability and willingness to reproduce the organizations' norms. Tooms (2006) asks, "What happens when an educational leader's prescription to fit is in direct conflict with his or her own expression of self" coupled with "the existence of heteronormative power in a school community" (p. 9)? In her research, Tooms (2006) found that the participants' sexual identities and professional identities were compatible if they were considered "The Right Kind of Queer" (p. 13). Throughout her research, Tooms (2006) identified the characteristics of "The Right Kind of Queer" found specifically in the areas of work ethic, the presentation of self, a straightened office, efforts to fit and partner loyalty, explicit revelation of identity, encounters with insensitive empathy, and political advocacy.

Tooms (2006) found "The Right Kind of Queer" must be a workaholic who focuses on building a positive infallible reputation as a school leader that could safely withstand the negative stereotypes associated with being queer. One of the participants reported, "The more the school district needs you, the less people will focus on their notion that you might be gay." Another said, "People tend to forget about your personal life if you are doing great things consistently at your school." Overworking was seen as a protection from "homophobic reactions" (Tooms, 2006, p. 14).

"The Right Kind of Queer" is mindful of her or his presentation of self at school. Such individuals adhere to traditional gender stereotypes and symbols of sexual identity.



Many of the participants shared stories about their experiences with “looking too butch to be the principal” (p. 15) and being moved from buildings to central office positions because of “looking too queer” (Tooms, 2006, p. 15). One participant talked about the ring she wore symbolizing her relationship with her partner; she “hid [her] hand a lot and felt like a coward for being afraid of what people would say if they noticed.” According to Tooms (2006), in order to be accepted in spite of their sexual orientation, participants subconsciously joined in maintaining and reinforcing the heterosexist school culture by committing themselves to being “The Right Kind of Queer” in order to “fit” in the school community (p. 16). Adhering to specific gender roles and the “straightened office” were examples of regulating their presentation of self at school. For a queer-identified school administrator, a “straightened office” is an office that is void of anything that would denote them as queer including pictures of their partners or other symbols associated with the queer community. Tooms (2006) found that “The Right Kind of Queer” is focused on the details of what is visible in their offices and what is not to avoid giving visitors implicit or explicit hints about their sexual orientation. Participants refrained from displaying personal artifacts in their professional spaces to ensure the comfort of visitors and to maintain their status as “The Right Kind of Queer.” One participant shared, “Basically, there is a huge part of my life – my family, my spouse, that isn’t even up in my own space because I can’t put it there” (Tooms, 2006, p. 17).

Queer school administrators experience a great deal of conflict over trying to fit into the school community while remaining loyal to their partners. Changing pronouns, failing to introduce partners during chance meetings in the community, introducing by name but not by title (i.e. partner, girlfriend), and avoiding social situations outside of

school are all examples of how queer administrators who strive to be “The Right Kind of Queer” manage their sexuality in relation to their professional experiences. Many times, these experiences result in feelings of eventual distrust, disloyalty, and disrespect. One participant shared, “You pretty much speak in a way that people relate to. After a while, it gets tedious and you feel like you are betraying your partner.” Another shared, “So now, when someone who knows me professionally stops to say hello, my partner will just walk away from us and go look in a store window or something, rather than stand there and not be introduced” (Tooms, 2006, p. 19). Tooms (2006) found that participants believed that in order to “fit,” they could be implicitly out about their sexual orientation in the workplace but declined to cross the invisible line by share their status as partnered or involved in a committed relationship. In her research, Tooms (2006) found that most participants came out professionally in a “constructed context” rather than thoughtlessly – disclosure of sexual orientation was typically done implicitly rather than explicitly (p. 21). Many looked for signs of acceptance from staff and then came out when it felt safe. “The Right Kind of Queer may be comfortable in many contexts implying that he or she is queer, the explicit revelation of such sexual status is rare” (Tooms, 2006, p.20).

Further, Tooms (2006) explores the concept of “insensitive empathy”, experienced when an out queer administrator encounters behavior from a colleague which is well meaning at the same time hurtful, annoying, sexist or heterosexist. Many times, insensitive empathy is an attempt to connect. Many of the participants viewed “tolerance to insensitivity” as part of their responsibility for being “The Right Kind of Queer” (2006, p. 25). Some did not want to challenge hurtful comments because they wanted to be viewed as more than their sexual orientation. Other study participants did

not see their tolerance as perpetuating the heterosexist climate in their schools but rather as modeling tolerance and empathy for others. As they did not feel comfortable advocating within their informal social relationships, they also did not feel comfortable advocating for equality within their school districts by addressing issues such as domestic partner benefits. According to Tooms (2006), “All of the participants in this study viewed their personal life (which included their sexual identity) as separate from their work life and often engaged in separation strategies to keep their sexual identity and personal life away from their work life. When pressed however, participants were able to acknowledge that in many ways these two identities are at times intertwined, except when it came to the notion of advancing social justice issues that would advance a queer rights agenda” (p. 25-26).

Tooms (2006) concluded that in order to be “The Right Kind of Queer” professionally, the participants suffered personally. Participants exercised self-surveillance ranging from how their office was decorated, to how one interacted with their partner at the grocery store, to making the choice to confront hurtful comments (Tooms, 2006). “The Right Kind of Queer” understands that acts that are seen as normal to the heterosexual majority are considered flaunting when done by queer administrators. “‘The Right Kind of Queer’ downplays their sexual orientation by carefully and constantly omitting parts of their life that heterosexuals do not think twice about sharing. Part of the frustration for participants related to their efforts to negotiate their sexual identity has to do with the view that when [they] use language [they] are doing something more than speaking, [they] are acting” (Tooms, 2006, p. 31).

As a result of her research, Tooms (2006) asserts that being “The Right Kind of Queer” results in perpetuating “the heteronormative power structure” (p.33). The implication of the participants’ choices “center on maintaining a reality in which the school organizations (and therefore society) still understand queer educators and queer educational leaders as an anomaly that exists only in theory or in ‘other school districts’ far away from the towns and cities where they live” (Tooms, 2006, p.33). “The Right Kind of Queer” reproduces the hegemonic culture that he or she works within because of their silence which they see as a necessary effort to fit and thus maintain their job security. “The commitment to improving the lives of the children they serve is a covenant that transcends the pain, inconvenience, and frustration of being The Right Kind of Queer” (Tooms, 2006, p.34).

Similar to Tooms’ work, Jones-Redmond (2007) interviewed nine school administrators that identified as gay or lesbian to explore the ways their personal and professional identities interact in the negotiation of their roles as school leaders in heteronormative organizations. Through her research, Jones-Redmond (2007) found that participants expended great amounts of energy to hide their sexual orientation in the workplace which impacted their leadership. For participants, there was a tension: continue to hide their identity or risk being their selves. While they experienced guilt about their “self-imposed censorship,” Jones-Redmond (2007) found that participants were constrained by five specific factors: 1) societal expectations of a school leader; 2) constant awareness and desire to perform above expectations; 3) desire to be more authentic; 4) safety and comfort in the workplace; and 5) fear.

Jones-Redmond (2007) found that participants had specific ideas about what it meant to be school leaders that were compounded by increased visibility in the community and society's expectation that school leaders are heterosexual. Participants acknowledged that members of their school community were aware that they identified as gay or lesbian; but participants were unwilling to directly confirm their suspicions because they could not be completely sure the community knew. Because of the increased visibility and the negative stereotypes associated with being gay or lesbian, participants were compelled to hold themselves to higher expectations, a strategy used to combat stereotypes attributed to queer identity. Participants sought to be viewed as good administrators instead of gay administrators (Jones-Redmond, 2007). Participants were aware of their internalized messages and the potential for discrimination, but they desired to live more authentically in the workplace, especially with students who they witnessed coming out earlier. They desired to be positive role models for students struggling with their sexuality and were comfortable with the idea of being implicitly out in the school community, but still used a wide range of identity management strategies to protect themselves (Jones-Redmond, 2007).

Jones-Redmond (2007) identified fear and the comfort of others as the primary reasons participants chose not to disclose their sexuality at school. Participants were concerned about others' comfort with their sexual orientation. They also questioned the effectiveness of districts' anti-discrimination policies in protecting them. Similar to Fraynd and Capper's (2003) findings, Jones-Redmond (2007) found that participants declined to explicitly reveal their gay and lesbian identities because they feared public ridicule, job loss, limited job opportunities outside the district, and possible exclusion

from the field of education. Participants also shared the concern about the possibility of being identified as pedophiles because of their sexual orientation and community attitudes (Jones-Redmond, 2007).

Koschoreck's work shares many of the same themes found in Tooms' and Jones-Redmonds' work but through a personal lens. Koschoreck writes about his personal experiences as an out queer scholar and about his research in interviewing queer school administrators. Koschoreck argues that the way to challenge the normalizing practice of heterosexism is for queer administrators to speak up about these issues (2003). He insists that refusing to remain silent about issues of sexuality represents a commitment to transgress the normalizing practices of heteronormativity. The process of acceptance involves building rapport and relationships and being upfront about one's sexuality. Koschoreck understands that sometimes this is perceived as a gay agenda; other times, many are not immediately comfortable with this disclosure.

Koschoreck's assertions echo Sears' (1997) work regarding strategies to resist heterosexism and homophobia which call for speaking openly about experiences and the effects of heterosexism. To illustrate this, Koschoreck shares a personal experience with an advisee who was uncomfortable with his openness about his sexuality. Koschoreck (2003) said to the advisee: "Look, the bottom line is that I'm not willing to not talk about these things. Too many people are hurt when we – as educators – are unwilling to acknowledge that there are different sexualities. The reason it's not enough to simply say, I'm gay and then not bring it up again is that by doing that you get to stay in your comfort zone and make all kinds of assumptions about who I am based on your stereotypical ideas of what it means to be gay. And you don't get to know me unless you hear the

experiences I have to share” (p.40). While Koschoreck’s experience was with a college-level student, his words resonate with educators working with younger students and their struggle to both live out and combat heteronormativity within their schools.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview

This chapter describes the design of the study, role of the researcher, assumptions and limitations, participant criteria and description, data collection methods and data analysis procedures. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of lesbian-identified school administrators, particularly those that relate to interactions with students and their parents.

#### Design of Study

I used a phenomenological research design to answer the following research questions: How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about their sexual identity from district personnel? How do lesbian school leaders in public schools answer questions about sexual identity from students? How do lesbian school leaders in public schools answer questions about sexual identity from their parents? And how do their feelings, experiences and this partial or potential “closet” affect their leadership? I selected a qualitative research design because qualitative research addresses questions like mine, those that seek to understand processes and concepts that cannot be measured in numbers. In particular, I relied on methods of in-depth interviewing with a phenomenological approach as theorized by Seidman (2005). Interviewing can be used effectively to understand the experiences of people who speak in their own words and interpret their own experiences from an emic (or insider’s) perspective. When shared, these experiences and personal stories can help “transform and change social conditions” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). Oral narratives facilitate a way of



knowing and a process of meaning-making (Glesne, 2006). “It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman, 2005, p. 7). Through this meaning making process of self-reflection, we give consideration to aspects of our lives that we may not have considered without prompting. Seidman (2005) continues, “...recounting narratives of experiences has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experiences” (p. 8).

According to Glesne (2006), qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the experiences of participants; this is accomplished through in-depth, long-term interviewing relationships. For Seidman (2005), in-depth interviewing is the preferred way to understand the experiences of people working in education and the meaning they make from their experiences. For this study, I used a method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing which combines life history interviewing and phenomenology that Seidman introduced in *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2005). Seidman’s method relies on the use of open-ended questions and the interviewer’s ability to build upon and explore the responses shared by participants to explore their experiences and the meaning they make from these experiences about a specific topic. This sharing takes place over a series of three interviews.

### Role of Researcher

My identity as a lesbian school administrator was present and considered at each step of the research process. I reflected continuously and critically on the ways in which

the participants, setting, research topic and I interacted and influenced each other throughout the research process to ensure reflexivity because of the personal nature of this research and my identity as the researcher (Glesne, 2006; Schwandt, 2007). I am aware that the participants and I have some shared experiences; these shared experiences facilitated an immediate rapport. My lens as a lesbian school administrator was an asset in this research process. In her work, Smith (1998) asserts that “the value and the power of ethnographic study increases when the researcher is a member of the cultural group and is able to use culturally learned interpretation skills throughout the research process” (p. 81). My experiences as a lesbian school administrator assisted in understanding the language used by participants and helped me listen for double meanings that could have been missed (Smith, 1998). My identity as a lesbian school administrator influenced the participants’ willingness to participate and their openness during the research process. At times during our conversations, participants referred to our rapport and their comfort in sharing because of our common experiences.

I disclosed both my lesbian identity and my position as a school administrator to all participants at the beginning of the study. In her research, Browne (2005) found that disclosing her identity as a “non-heterosexual” woman assisted in the recruitment of participants. She hypothesized that “participants may have trusted [her] because [she is] a non-heterosexual woman and [she] did have easier access than perhaps a ‘straight’ man would have been granted” (Browne, 2005, p. 50). Disclosure of my lesbian identity to potential participants positively impacted the number of participants that agree to participate. Originally, I proposed a sample size of 3 to 5 participants; as I contacted

potential participants, the number of participants grew to 8. This revelation also assisted in building rapport with participants through the interview process.

As I was collecting and analyzing data, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to ensure that each participant's voice was represented in the research clearly and as completely as possible. I included large pieces of their interview transcripts in my data analysis found in Chapters Four, Five and Six; and I also placed a sample of the participants' profiles, reduced and punctuated transcripts in the Appendices (Appendix C). In her research, Rogers (2003) explored her feelings about the influence she had on her participants' lives; during this process, I often thought about the potential impact my questions and the participants' reflection would have on their lives. Was I forcing them to consider feelings and experiences they had emotionally buried years before? How would having these conversations affect them as they continued in their careers as school administrators? During our time together, their stories affected me personally and professionally which I explore in depth in Chapter Seven.

#### Limitations of the Study

The participants in this study were all white self-identified lesbian school administrators whose primary administrative experiences were in suburban schools in a metropolitan area located in one Midwestern state. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all lesbian school administrators. Participation in this research was voluntary; I used the method of snowball sampling to locate participants. Where the snowball begins directly impacts the voices represented in this study as is evident in this sample.

#### Participants

I expected one of the most challenging aspects of this proposed research would be locating participants. However, I found participants were eager to participate in this research, to share their experiences and to have a voice that has otherwise been silenced in schools. Browne (2005) noted in her research that accessing research participants who identify as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or transsexual is the most challenging aspect of conducting research with this population. For this research study, I identified the following criteria for study participants:

- 1) Women who identify as lesbian;
- 2) Building-level administrators in K-12 public education;
- 3) Employed for at least one year as a building-level administrator; and
- 4) No age, race or ethnic requirements.

The criteria were purposefully broad because of the potential difficulty in identifying participants; for example, I did not specified criteria for specific age, race, or ethnicity. Once I identified a group of potential participants, I found that I had a racially homogenous sample. All of the participants were European Americans and the majority of their professional experiences were in suburban schools.

For this research, I interviewed eight participants and reached saturation within that sample size. According to Seidman (2005), this “method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p. 55). Regardless of the sample size or demographics, the purpose of this study is not to claim universality in experiences, only to share the experiences of the participants; some of which may be common among them, and to begin deeply

examining the experiences of the population of school administrators. All eight participants were European American women who identify as lesbian living in the metropolitan area of a mid-size city in the Midwest. Each participant is currently or was previously employed in a K-12 public school as a school administrator in a suburban school district (Appendix A).

Participants could have been difficult to identify because they are lesbian building-level administrators who may or may not be out. To build my participant pool, I used the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy sometimes called chain referral sampling that is used to locate participants within difficult to reach populations who possess specific characteristics. To locate participants initially, I used social networking and posting notices in public queer spaces. After locating and interviewing participants, each was asked to refer other potential participants with the same characteristics (Berg, 2007). Many participants referred other lesbian school administrators working in their school districts. Several researchers working with the queer community have used snowball sampling to recruit participants. In her dissertation, Redmond-Jones (2007) used snowball sampling to identify nine school administrators who identify as gay or lesbian for her study. Tooms (2006) successfully used the snowball sampling method in her research to identify six participants for her research. In my research, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants who met a small number of criteria. The snowball sampling method relies on personal relationships and referrals to identify participants (Browne, 2005). Therefore, to recruit participants for this study, I posted notices in queer spaces and asked friends and colleagues via email and telephone to contact people they knew who fit the criteria that may be willing to

participate. I did not ask friends to out potential participants by giving me their names; rather, I asked friends to have potential participants contact me. This precaution was a necessary ethical measure to maintain confidentiality. If they were willing to participate, they either gave permission for me to contact them directly or contacted me using the information I provided. I provided a flyer with my contact information and a brief description of the research study to potential participants.

In her article, Browne (2005) explores some of the benefits and limitations of snowball sampling, specifically relating to the issues of inclusion and exclusion of voice. Each of the ways I chose to recruit participants have limitations that I considered: 1) targeting queer social groups could exclude those who are not out in the community; 2) advertising in queer media may exclude those who do not have access to queer media; and 3) using social networks could limit the range of participants. It is also important to remember that “where snowballs begin can be significant to the formation of the sample creating particular exclusions and boundaries” (Browne, 2005, p. 53). This was evident in the composition of my sample – most of the participants were familiar with one another and referenced each other throughout the interviews. There was an inter-relatedness of the participants. Some of the participants came from the same school district; others knew each other through professional networks. Using personal referrals results in an informal screening process whereby the people recommending may use their own criteria to screen out potential participants. This research is not representative of an entire community of queer-identified school leaders, but as Browne (2005) asserts for her research with non-heterosexual women, using personal networks “meant that women did not have to define as ‘lesbian’, access gay media or support groups or regularly socialize on the gay scene in

order to take part. Moreover, using these networks gave [her] access to women who would not answer advertisements and who, [she believed], had to be asked individually. Consequently, [Browne] was able to include non-heterosexual women who were not ‘out and proud’, whose voices are often left unheard or invalidated” (p. 50). All of the participants in this study positioned themselves as implicitly or explicitly out with friends and family, implicitly out with district personnel and closeted with parents and students.

### Data Collection

I completed the University’s Internal Review Board process and received approval to begin interviewing participants. As with all research, and maybe even more importantly with my research because of the sensitive nature of identity work, protecting the participants’ identity was vital. For participants, there were personal and professional risks for participating. The risks varied depending on the participants’ disclosure of sexuality personally and professionally, their districts’ discrimination protections for sexual orientation, and the communities in which they work. Indeed, other risks were likely present for participants but invisible to me as a lesbian-identified researcher. Although each of the participants expressed their excitement about the research and their participation, it is possible that they experienced some emotional stress by talking about and reflecting on past experiences that may have been hurtful or even traumatic. Referrals to the University of Missouri – St. Louis School and Family Counseling Center were available for mental health services for participants if needed as a result of participating in the study.

I began the process with a telephone conversation during which we established the initial meeting time and place; this first meeting, even by telephone, was vital in the

process of beginning to build rapport with the participants. During this initial conversation, I asked each participant for contact information that was kept in a secure location with limited access. I also broadly described the study and worked with the participant to identify time and place for the first interview. Ideally, according to Seidman (2005), the interviews should be scheduled anywhere from three days to one week apart; this timeframe can be and was adjusted for scheduling issues. In most instances, the interviews were held approximately one week apart. In a few cases, there was more time between interviews because of scheduling difficulties. All data was collected through in-depth interviewing conducted over three sessions; the sessions ranged from 40 minutes to 120 minutes depending on the extensiveness of the participant's experiences. During this research, I found that the more time the participant spent in education as an administrator, the more information and experiences she shared during our conversations.

Prior to beginning the first interview, I explained the Informed Consent, asked the participant if she had any questions regarding participation or the study, and then had each participant sign the consent. In Seidman's (2005) three-interview approach, each session is specifically structured to elicit specific kinds of reflections from the participant (Appendix B). During the first interview, the interviewer uses open-ended questions to help the participant establish a context for his or her experience. For example, I began the first interview by asking each participant "Why did you become a school administrator?" These experiences included stories from their entire life course, perhaps about their sexuality, relationships, families, schooling, friends, community and/or work. The second interview was focused on the participant's current lived experiences within the topic of



the research. For example, I asked each participant “What it is like to be a school administrator who identifies as lesbian?” It is important during the second interview to encourage the participant to focus on the details of her experience. Part of this interview included asking the participant to reconstruct her day and exploring recent experiences related to the topic of the study. In all of the interviews, but specifically during the third interview, the questions were structured to encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning the experiences have for them. For example, I started the third interview by asking each participant “What does it mean to be a school leader that identifies as lesbian?” During this interview, I also expanded on the questions/answers from the first two interviews to encourage the participant to reflect on the meaning in her experiences, specifically around working with students and families. Throughout the interviewing process but during this session specifically, participants were encouraged to make emotional connections between personal and professional experiences (Seidman, 2005).

The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder to ensure no auditory material was missed. I also took some notes throughout the process; but most were reminders to follow-up on a participant’s answer or to question a participant further regarding a topic. The interviews were transcribed using ExpressScribe, digital transcription software, directly into a Microsoft Word document. The interviews were transcribed verbatim using a notation system developed prior to transcribing the first interview. The same transcription process and notation system was used for all interviews. After transcribing the interviews, I inserted information from my field notes to create a transcript that accurately reflected both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interview (Seidman, 2005).

After transcribing the interview, I listened to each interview again while reviewing the transcript draft to ensure the interview was accurately transcribed. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I reduced the transcripts by removing off-topic material which consisted of outside interruptions during the interview such as phone calls or visitors. After reducing the transcripts, I completed a process of punctuating the transcripts to create interviews that could be easily shared with both the participants and others reading this research (Appendix C). The process I used to punctuate the transcripts included: listening to audio of interviews to add punctuation to indicate hesitations, pauses and the beginning and end of sentences; removed repeated words or phrases; removed words typically used as pauses including “um” and “uh”; and changed words such as “til” to “until” and “cause” to “because”.

The final step in preparing the transcripts was removing all identifying information to protect the identity of the participants and their partners’. The participants selected their own pseudonyms for the transcripts. When participants used their partners’ names in ways that could not be removed without jeopardizing the meaning of the data, they were asked to select a pseudonym for their partners as well. Other information removed from the transcripts included school district and school building names, names of colleagues, and names of places that could be used to identify participants.

I used a process of member-checking to increase the trustworthiness of the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I provided each participant with a printed copy of the reduced, punctuated transcript and a cover letter outlining the process I used to reduce and punctuate the narratives. In the cover letter, I offered copies of the verbatim transcripts to each participant. I also asked them for their feedback on the accuracy of the

data. Participants were given the opportunity to provide verbal or written feedback on the material; the feedback I received from participants supported that the data was an accurate reflection of their experiences.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis actually begins during data collection and transcribing. During both, I maintained a log of my procedures, thoughts and reflections in a notebook. In addition, I used two forms of analysis outlined in Seidman's (2005) work: 1) constructing participant profiles (reduced, punctuated transcripts) using their own words; and 2) inductively developing categories to make thematic connections among participants' experiences. Throughout this process, it is important to understand that as the researcher, I exercised judgment about what was significant to the study; because of this responsibility, reflexivity was crucial. Through the processes of creating profiles and then categorizing material to make thematic connections, I considered the issues of power and privilege that impact the process of analyzing the material as a researcher. I was also aware of the influence of our shared journey on my data analysis.

Profiles, also referred to as narratives or vignettes, are powerful ways to share participants' experiences by telling a story using the participant's emic perspective (Seidman, 2005). The story is both the participant's and the interviewer's: as the researcher, I used the participant's words to craft the narrative, but made decisions about what was included or excluded in the story. Unlike the process of coding and categorizing passages, narratives provide readers with a powerful opportunity to experience a representation of the whole story as told by the participant. Profiles are created from transcripts; when creating a profile, the interviewer selects parts of the

transcript to exclude and eliminates the notations for pauses and other utterances such as um or uh. I refer to these profiles as reduced, punctuated transcripts; a sample is included in Appendix C.

In addition to creating the profiles, I used a process of categorizing data to make thematic connections between participants. I used the process of constant comparison in the process of identifying themes in the participants' narratives (Dye et al, 2000). In the course of looking for themes, some of the participants' experiences were similar but some contradicted one another. It was important to explore both the similarities and contradictions in participant's experience which are explored further in Chapters Four, Five and Six (Seidman, 2005). Using the process of constant comparison, the categories evolved as I worked with the data, which I noted in a log as I processed the data. I recorded emerging themes in the log as I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. After I verified the transcripts for accuracy, I read through each transcript noting words or phrases that appeared frequently in the data. I transferred the themes noted in the margin to the log and then compared both lists. These lists of themes were then organized into categories that will be further explored in Chapters Four, Five and Six. This was a difficult exercise as I look at the data through a lens of familiarity. As a qualitative researcher, I followed Glesne's charge to "look for patterns, but [I did] not try to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm" (2006, p. 5).

Once I created the profiles (reduced, punctuated transcripts) and categories, I began the process of organizing and representing my interpretations, determining what meaning I made of this work. Some of the questions I asked myself were adapted directly from Seidman (2005): 1) What have I learned from this experience? 2) What are some of

the connections between participants? 3) What are some of the contradictions? 4) How do I understand or explain these connections or contradictions? 5) Are the results of this research consistent or inconsistent with the literature? 6) What are the implications of this research? 7) As a result of this research, where do we go next? My analysis and findings are explored in depth in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: PARTICIPANTS' JOURNEYS

#### Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to answer the following research questions: How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about their sexual identity from district personnel? How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about sexual identity from students? How do lesbian school administrators in public schools answer questions about sexuality from their parents? And how do their feelings, experiences and this partial or potential “closet” affect their leadership? Over the next three chapters, I will provide my analysis and findings.

I begin this chapter with a snapshot of each participant's personal and professional experiences with positioning themselves on the out continuum with different audiences. This chapter specifically focuses on the questions: 1) How do participants describe their experiences of coming out to family and friends? 2) How does the way participants situate themselves on the out continuum with friends and family differ from the way they position themselves on the out continuum in the workplace with district personnel, students and their parents? 3) How do participants choose to disclose their sexuality in their professional experiences? What words do they choose and why do they select these words?

The answers to these questions are important for establishing a foundation to answer the overarching research questions. In Chapter Five, I will explore the common factors that influenced where participants situated themselves on the out continuum with

district personnel. In Chapter Six, I will explore the common themes found in participants' decisions to share or withhold information about their sexual orientation and personal relationships with students and their parents.

### Participants' Personal Journeys

The grueling emotional journey of coming out never completely comes to an end. Everyday new people enter our lives; as we make these new emotional connections, the decision making process begins anew. We read the audience, listening for signals of acceptance and negotiating the questions that surface early on in the relationship. The coming out journey is unique for everyone, and it changes over time as we become more comfortable with ourselves and with the acceptance we find in others. For participants, their progressions varied; many of the factors that influenced the decisions to share their sexual orientation, specifically in the workplace, were similar. In this chapter, I share some of each participant's journey and how they negotiate their identities with their families and in the workplace. It is important to provide a snapshot of each participant's personal journey as a way of helping the reader understand how participants' experiences influence where they situate themselves on the out continuum in both their personal and professional lives.

The process of revealing their sexuality was similar for participants, but the length of time it took for disclosure varied. Younger participants and participants who embraced their sexuality later in life progressed more quickly than older participants who identified as lesbian by college. Each participant went through a period of self-reflection, rationalization, justification, and relationship building as part of the process of disclosing their sexuality at work; a process that repeats itself each time participants decide to move

from one district to another or from one school to another. Participants had explicit conversations about their sexuality with a limited number of their colleagues; in most situations, participants revealed their sexuality by referring to their partner, not by saying, “I am a lesbian.” Participants’ timeframes and comfort with disclosing their sexuality were influenced by seven primary factors:

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships with colleagues and staff;
- 3) Desire for lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;
- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational themes;
- 6) Perception of informal support;
- 7) Formal protections.

These themes will be explored in Chapter Five after the discussion of the participants’ individual progression in accepting their lesbian identity, disclosing their lesbian identity to loved ones, and the decision to share their lesbian identity at work. At the time of the interviews, all participants considered themselves implicitly, and in some cases, explicitly out with district personnel.

#### *Alex’s journey*

Alex is a 41 year-old high school principal in a small suburban school district; she has worked in the position for five years. Throughout her time there, she has been in a relationship with Annette, her partner of over five years. Annette does not work in education and she is completely out both at work and with her family. Alex came out as a lesbian to her family and friends quickly after acknowledging her sexuality in her mid thirties; like many lesbians who identify later in life, prior to accepting her lesbian



identity, Alex dated men and wanted a traditional family. During our conversations, Alex shared her struggle with her acceptance of her lesbian identity:

I started to actively deal with [my sexuality] when I was about 36; so I was kind of late coming to it... If I looked back on my life, I would say probably I thought about it and just repressed it for many, many years. I had what I would call a fling when I was about 30 or 31, but did the old it's just that one person kind of thing. [I] might have been a little older than that, might have been 32 or 33. I didn't really want to go there. I tried dating; I had the typical traditional mindset of what my life would be and that just wasn't happening; and [I] was searching and come from a kind of family, I love my family dearly they're not the most emotive and so very repressed in that regard. So it really took a really good friend of mine to sort of finally force me to deal with it. (Alex 25 – 26, 28 – 36)

The decision to share her sexuality with her family so quickly after her own acceptance was influenced by her mother's social connectedness in the community. Alex grew up in a community that neighbors her school district; she was very concerned that her parents would discover that she was dating women through social conversations with others in the community and she did not want them to be surprised. Through her journey of self discovery, Alex decided that she would tell her friends and family after she was involved in a significant relationship. Shortly after she and Annette began their relationship, Alex began telling her friends and family. During our conversations, Alex shared the reactions of her family regarding her sexuality and her relationship with Annette:

My siblings were wonderful, not a problem there at all. My parents are older; and I would say that while they were wonderful, it was difficult for them initially. My mom wanted me to very much keep it quiet; she was worried and she still is about my career. I realized that some of the awkwardness was as much [them] not used to me being in a relationship period, let alone with another woman. But then three years ago, I got breast cancer and that just flipped everything on its head. Where it was no longer about, that didn't matter so much. They saw how well she took care of me; and so I tell her, I got breast cancer for her because my family loves her. What it did was put it into a perspective [for] them; and on a wrung of what was important about me, it became irrelevant. And so [Annette] was always included and part of it very quickly, it really did put it into context for them. (Alex 55 – 66)

Alex's friends were also supportive of her relationship; for many of them, Alex's sexual orientation did not come as a surprise. Alex's experience coming out to her family and friends has been positive and came swiftly after her own acceptance of her sexuality. During our conversations, Alex talked about the decision to come out so quickly; she shared that she did not realize until later that many of her gay and lesbian friends anguished over the decision to come out to family and friends for years, many never coming out.

Five years ago, toward the end of her time as an assistant principal in another district, Alex accepted her lesbian identity and met her partner, Annette. During that first summer, Alex moved from her position as an assistant principal into a principal position in another district. She shared her progression of disclosing her sexuality in her current position:

So first year here not at all, second year very small circle, toward the end of that year came out to a few people. By the end of last year, I just stopped playing the game. And so with folks, if I were going to reference it, I don't come out to people anymore I just say my partner and I and move on. But I don't do that with every teacher, I don't do that with students at all. (Alex 130 – 134)

Alex considers herself implicitly out with district personnel; she shared her thoughts on the difference for her between living implicitly and explicitly out:

I'm not trying to pass so I would say implicitly... First of all, I haven't talked with every teacher about it. There are teachers who I have never broached the conversation; but it's one of those, I presume that it's fairly common knowledge. But then, I don't know; I don't feel like I'm that out. I'm not completely out at school because I don't make it part, a very up front part, of who I am to the school community. I don't feel like I'm out at work. I don't in the sense of, I don't feel like I will publically say in say the school newspaper that I'm gay or that I would stand up at a board meeting if the issue was domestic partner benefits and say as a gay person I... I would not do that; and as a result, I don't feel like I'm fully out at work. I feel like I'm not in the closet either because I don't deny who I am and I don't pretend I am someone who I am not. I think for me being out at work would mean me being willing to publically, no matter who the audience is,

reference it and publically say in context of whatever we're talking about. I'm not in the closet because I don't pretend that I'm straight. (Alex 1526, 1294 – 1307)

Alex progressed in less than five years from living in two separate worlds to integrating those worlds in conversation with staff and sometimes in social situations. Alex references her partner in conversations with staff with which she feels comfortable but realizes that her sexuality is not a secret among members of the school community. When asked about her decision to talk about her partner or bring her partner to a staff function, she shared:

It's a dance that I play, and you probably play as well, that a straight person doesn't have to think about... And it's things I have to think about that a straight principal doesn't have to think about, period... Last year, we all went we got a box at the [hockey] game and so everyone brought their spouses and I brought [my partner]. So in small group settings, she has socialized; but in school direct school functions, she never has and I don't know that she will. (Alex 284 – 286, 704 – 705, 707 – 708)

During our conversations, Alex talked about the exhaustion she experienced when she was living a dual life, an exhaustion she has experienced less and less of as she has integrated her personal and professional lives:

It was a whole lot more when I was first coming out and I was living a dual life because when I was living a dual life that's tiresome, that's a mental gymnastics, that's walking with one foot in both worlds. I don't live a dual life anymore, I live my life - some people have more access to it than others. My partner is part of my life all the time; sometimes more than other times. I think that when you try to completely keep the worlds separate is when it's really, really difficult because if no one here knew then I would have to edit everything I did, I would have to edit every conversation I had about the evenings or the weekends... So if you live a completely dual life, then yeah, I would say it's mentally very tiresome and probably physically; but I don't live a dual life, I live my life and I just give different people levels of access. (Alex 1028 – 1036, 1041 – 1044).

With her family and friends, Alex has positioned herself as explicitly out. But in the school community, her position on the out continuum varies depending on the audience. Alex is implicitly out with all district personnel; but she is explicitly out with some

others. While Alex believes that the parents and students in her school are aware of her sexuality, she is closeted with most parents and all students deflecting personal questions and refraining from sharing details of her relationship with Annette.

*Lily's journey*

Lily is a fifty-six year-old assistant superintendent in a mid-size suburban school district. She has worked in her current position for the last 20 years and was last a building principal in the 1980s in another suburban school district. Lily has been in a relationship with her current partner for the last eighteen years; Kathryn does not work in the field of education. They have two teenage African-American sons that they adopted since Lily has been in her current position; both of their sons attend school in Lily's district. Lily first realized she was a lesbian when she was eighteen years-old during church camp; she disclosed her sexuality to her parents shortly thereafter. During our conversations, Lily described coming out to her parents during college:

I had been a youth leader so I had a seat on some big church committees. And at the time, there was interest in becoming more and more educated about gays and lesbians. So there was an event; and I was going to be a resource person for the event. I thought I ought to tell my parents before that happened - so I did. I was wrong about how they were going to react; they both reacted differently but I had predicted the reversed reaction in each of them. I thought my dad would be fine and my mom wouldn't; and it was the opposite. It kind of never got talked about again except they always knew who I was living with. They always knew who I was hanging out with. And my mother, let's see my mom died when I was 27 or 28, and I remember I wanted her to know that I was happy and she was really fine with the whole thing. Then I thought my dad was and he used to even go on vacations with me and other people; but he had a setback later and it's been a process... Well let me just say that we got to a point where we had to make agreements if we were going to stay in a relationship there were some things we could not discuss. (Lily 118 – 130, 132 – 134)

Initially, Lily was open with her parents about her sexuality; but afterwards they did not talk about it. She has a sister who now knows about her lesbian identity; but early on,

Lily did not disclose her sexuality or confirm her sexuality as a way of protecting her sister from others' inquiries. Lily's niece and nephew are actively involved in her life with her partner and sons. After her mother died, Lily's father remarried; prior to his new relationship, her father was accepting of her sexuality and relationships. Now remarried, his new wife is not accepting of Lily's sexuality and has adopted the approach of "love the sinner, hate the sin;" this has affected her relationship with her father.

Contrary to her relatively open familial relationships, Lily's experience in the workplace has been very different. During her time as a building administrator, Lily described herself as closeted at work. She shared her experience:

I compartmentalized my life. I worked hard and I played hard. I preferred to be in predominantly lesbian company when I was not at work; and I did not have the capacity to integrate those two worlds... When I came to [this city], one of my colleagues, a straight man immediately hit on me and concluded with my rebuffing it was because I was lesbian. I came out to him because he was very willing to pose as a heterosexual man hanging out with me, as a protective move for me; and I was willing to let him because I was scared. When I became a principal, I don't recall that I was out to anybody at the elementary school. At the middle school, before I left there I was out to a couple of people; but they were other lesbians. Now at the middle school, I don't really think I was fooling anybody; but we were all about the business of turning that place around so it was not a subject of conversation. I don't really think people cared... Now there were other lesbians that I got connected to while I was in [my previous district]; and in the end, the superintendent was a friend and I was out to him. When I left and went to [my current district], there were people who knew I was lesbian when I did that; but I wasn't out about it. (Lily 103 – 105, 179 – 188, 194 - 198)

Lily and Kathryn began their relationship about two years into her time in her current position as an assistant superintendent; and Lily continued to live closeted in her position. Throughout her time as a building administrator and continuing into her current position, she had terrorizing experiences that reinforced her feelings of needing to remain closeted. She shared one of those experiences:

I had a couple of experiences that gave me a healthy sense of fear... I had friends who were getting fired; and I had friends who were getting stalked. And I was absolutely a part of a closeted lesbian community and a lot of them were women trying to make their way in leadership roles. And one of my partners, who was the high school principal, used to have to go out on dates with the superintendent; and I came home to my house one night and she's cornered in my kitchen by the superintendent. It was all about threatening her with you don't want me to expose you, give me a little loving kind of thing. So it wasn't, it didn't feel safe; now I'm not somebody that scares very easily. (Lily 359, 368 – 376)

That experience and others that were similar kept Lily firmly closeted and fearful as a building administrator; then Lily and her partner made a decision that significantly changed her life both personally and in the workplace. Approximately three years after moving into the assistant superintendent position, she and her partner decided to adopt their first son; this decision resulted in Lily's public outing. She described the experience:

After three years, that boss died and I became interim superintendent for a year. And in that same year, at the time the boss died and the board said they wanted me to be interim superintendent, I said well be aware that I am going through the adoption process. In the year that I was interim superintendent, our older son came along and I had made a decision that I wasn't going to let people think I was going to be a single parent. So I used the language of co-parent; but it was the adoption experience that outed me. I got ambushed by a rightwing board member in a closed door, one-on-one session, after which I had to call an attorney and have a conference with the board president over the threats. I got quiet but there was really no secret; and as time grew and then I, when I brought our younger son to school in [my district], you gotta fill out the parent paperwork. By then, I just had to cross that threshold and now if I think it's relevant, I'll say something. Now I just got a new boss, after 15 years, and it happened on the very first day. The boys were in Wyoming and he said, "Are you gonna go get them?" And I said, "No, my partner is." We have a lot of gay and lesbian administrators. It's just not a big deal; in fact, it's a big deal when people try to not put it out there - it's a bigger deal. (Lily 200 – 217)

The adoption of her sons and then eventually bringing her sons to school in her district changed her partner's visibility in the district at school events. In her previous administrative positions, Lily had relationships with other partners. During her time as a building-level administrator, her partners did not attend school functions or work-related

social events. In her current position, her partner attends some school functions with Lily as the parents of their children; but Kathryn does not attend school activities as Lily's partner if they are not related to their sons' schooling. Kathryn does not attend work-related social functions with Lily; Lily chooses to attend very few of these functions. While the adoption and then the decision to enroll her sons in her school district have increased her visibility as a lesbian administrator and forced her to integrate her personal and professional worlds to some extent, she is still more comfortable keeping those worlds separate. During our conversations, she frequently shared her thoughts on having multiple targeted identities: lesbian, woman, and mother of two African-American sons. While her worlds have become more integrated, she remains guarded:

When I stand on the sidelines, when my younger son played football and I stood on the sidelines, I really had to work at having conversations with people because I don't know if I am confronting, "oh there's the assistant superintendent" if I'm confronting, "oh there's the lesbian" if I'm confronting "there's the white mom of black children." I don't know how they see me; and so I'm not, I don't walk into a room and become the life of the party. (Lily 507 – 513)

With family and friends, Lily has positioned herself as explicitly out. Initially, as a building administrator, Lily situated herself as covering. As an assistant superintendent, Lily has progressed to living implicitly out with district personnel. When Lily and Kathryn decided to enroll their sons in the district, Lily's sexual orientation and non-traditional family became more visible to other families in the district; because of this visibility, she is implicitly out with families in the district.

#### *Kayla's journey*

Kayla is a thirty-six year-old assistant principal in a mid-size suburban school district; she has been in her position for eight years. Her partner of eight years is a teacher in the same school district; and together they have a thirteen month-old daughter. Kayla

realized she was gay during her college years and came out to her family within a couple of years after acknowledging her sexual identity. She shared the experience of telling her mother she is a lesbian:

I don't have a lot of patience with things, I don't. I mean I look back and go that really wasn't the best way to do that. Probably about a year after college; my mom's still waiting for me to tell her it was all a phase. So that was the hard part, the family is the hard part. My mom was the hard [one]; the rest of my family, my brother's like, "seriously it's about time you figured it out." ... It's one of those where you drop the bomb and you let it go for a little while. You have to let it settle. I mean I say about a year after college; but I think it might have been a little longer because I lived at home for a year and then moved in with a friend who I was not dating. Probably two months after we moved in, I went home and my mom and I were shopping at [a local discount store] and I dropped the bomb - I can still see that [store], I can still see that aisle too... She said, 'So are you with this person physically?' And I said, 'Yes I am.' and she went (horrified noise); and my mom's horribly asthmatic and in horribly bad health and I thought I was going to the hospital then and there. So then of course she wants me to go see a therapist - the next day she calls me, 'You need to go see a therapist.' I said, 'No, I don't mom; but if you want me to, I will.' I could see the therapist about some other things anyway. Yeah so we talked, my mom and I still pretty much to this day talk almost every day. Gay is still an issue. (Kayla 106 – 110, 136 – 141, 143 – 149)

While her mother continues to struggle with Kayla's lesbian identity, she is supportive of her relationship with her partner. Initially Kayla's father reacted negatively to her revelation but is also now supportive of her relationship with her partner and their family.

Kayla was hired in her current position by a lesbian-identified principal, and she was open about her sexuality with her and with others on the administrative team. For the first few years in her current position, Kayla was open about her sexuality with all district employees including the superintendent. She did not announce that she was a lesbian, but she was living openly in her relationship in the district, specifically with district personnel. During our conversations, Kayla described her early experiences in the district and then how it changed so abruptly: "I was ready to go out and scream from the



mountaintop... Because everything was going so well and then the walls started crumbling down around all of us; I mean it literally happened in about a two month period..." (Kayla 1290, 1292 – 1293) Approximately two years ago, Kayla watched the community persecute her principal for what they both believed to be her principal's sexual orientation. Kayla talked about her perception of her principal's experience and the way it affected her:

I think from now on I will be just a little bit more guarded; because it's like they can be talking. Because I still work with all those people who two months earlier to her face told her, "We're fine. All good. Here's your evaluation. It's perfect. We gotta work on the morale. We've gotta work on your test scores." Well okay, what high school doesn't have morale issues, fine. Two months later, "Oh by the way, the board wants you out at winter break... And everybody can say what they want to say about the job she was doing, they used that as the catalyst to then say, "You know what, we have this lady who's actually doing her job; however she's living as an out and open lesbian and is in charge of our school. And we don't like it; and I'm tired of dealing with the PR and so this is the catalyst. And now we can finally push; and now we can use this to get her away and out from in front of everything." Because they had nothing else - she had never had a bad evaluation. Nothing. She had community that was against her because of her open sexual orientation and her test scores were not good - they're not any better. After working with her side by side for seven solid years, we could start and end each other's sentences. It was very scary, and very, very, very difficult to watch her go through, as one of your best friends to just be crucified like that. (Kayla 1296 – 1301, 1698 – 1701, 382)

The experience of watching her principal lose her job because of her sexual orientation changed the way Kayla was willing to live in the district. She altered her appearance to present as more feminine and was more guarded about sharing her sexual identity. Prior to the experience, Kayla's partner attended school functions; after the experience with her principal, Kayla's partner continued to attend school-related events as a member of the school community but it would not be evident to anyone who did not already know that they were together. Kayla and her partner attend work-related social functions together as long as students and parents are not present. Kayla is explicitly out

with family and friends; she is implicitly out with her colleagues and references her partner in conversations; rather than saying, “I am gay” or “I am lesbian,” referring to her partner and their relationship is the way Kayla discloses her sexual orientation with district personnel. While Kayla believes students and families are aware of her sexuality, she positions herself as closeted on the out continuum, deflecting questions about her personal relationship and family.

### *Abby’s journey*

Abby is a forty-five year-old assistant superintendent in a mid-size suburban school district. She has been in this position for less than two years; prior to this, she was an assistant principal for three years and a principal for seven years in the same middle school in the same district. Abby has worked in her current school district for more than fifteen years as a teacher and administrator. She is currently partnered with a counselor in her district; they have been together for six years. Prior to that relationship, she was partnered with another former district employee for twelve years. Abby first realized she was a lesbian in high school and was in relationships with women starting in college. She and her previous partner lived together, but she did not officially disclose her sexual orientation to her parents until that relationship ended. Abby explained:

Oh I’m sure my family knew; I didn’t tell them. We still came [to visit], still stayed in the same room, didn’t lie about who I was traveling with, didn’t lie. We did pretend to have two different bedrooms in the house. (Abby 102, 104 – 106).

When Abby was asked why she decided to tell her family after her relationship ended and how they handled the news, she explained:

Because I was in major crisis... They were awesome, awesome; and actually it was a terrible time in family’s life. My mom had just lost her mom; and so actually, I had no desire to tell her but I ended up talking to my dad. So that’s how

that ended up happening; and then she found out through him... You know what, it really didn't change anything. (Abby 108, 110 – 113, 115)

Abby found her family to be supportive of her lesbian identity and her relationships. Her brother also identifies as gay; he and his partner have twins. Similarly to her experience of acceptance by her family, Abby has found her colleagues and the district to be supportive of her lesbian identity as well.

Abby and her previous partner lived within district boundaries; she shared how the end of that relationship was the catalyst for others in the district to be more aware of her sexual orientation and her progression of living more openly:

I don't think that either one of us told anybody that we were together. We lived together, we coached together; I mean we've lived together forever. We lived together in [this community], which you might as well put a sign in your front yard. So you know it was pretty obvious when we split up that it was pretty traumatic... We rode together. I'm trying to put myself back in that time, I was teaching in one building; she was teaching in another building. I think things just kind of happened as people started associating us together; we coached together. Usually we didn't ride together because she was going to one elementary school and I was going to another; however, people would see us out to eat in the community all the time. There were people that we socialized with so they began to know. And at that point, I was coming from [the southwest part of the state] in the early time and I had some real fears of anybody knowing. So that was really kind of the progression; when I entered [the district] and what my level of comfort would have been, which would have been I wouldn't have wanted anybody to know to later on I just became more and more comfortable. (Abby 167 – 171, 173 – 183)

Abby revealed more about the timeframe of her progression on the continuum of being out: "Hiding, I would say probably teaching, when I was teaching at the elementary level which is probably about four years. I would say passing, probably for the next 3 or 4 years. Beginning to come out as an assistant..." (Abby 225 – 227). Abby's partner does not attend school events as her partner; but they do attend informal social events with other district employees together. Abby believes that currently everyone in the district

was aware of her lesbian identity, and she does not hide it. Abby's assessment of her current situation: "Do I think everybody knows? Absolutely. Do I hide it? I don't think so. Have I ever made some brazen announcement? No." (Abby 158 – 159) She had told her former assistant principal and a few others in the district explicitly about her sexuality; others in the district were aware through her references to her partner in conversations and through conversations with others in the district. Abby has situated herself as explicitly out with family and friends. With most district personnel she is implicitly out; she has explicitly revealed her sexual orientation to some of her administrative colleagues. Although she believes everyone in the school community is aware of her lesbian identity, she is covering with students and families.

#### *Brittany's journey*

Brittany is a thirty-three year-old assistant principal in a mid-sized suburban school district; she has been in this position for just over two years. She has over ten years of experience in education, all in the same school district. She is currently partnered with Kelly, with whom she has been partnered with since shortly after entering the district as a teacher. Together they have three children all under the age of five. Brittany realized she was a lesbian in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and entered her first relationship with a woman in high school. She disclosed her sexual orientation to her mother soon after she began her first relationship. During our conversations, she shared the experience of coming out to her mother:

My mom just overheard a conversation and then asked some probing questions about it. And I just told her everything; and actually it was received with much resistance. She said some really straightforward, kind of I would say harsh comments; it was almost like the way over here I'm going to scare you out of this lifestyle. So interesting though because I look back and now I've had conversations with my mom - my mom actually had a relationship with a woman.

And I think really part of her conversation with me was out of fear that I'm an only child, I have no siblings, so she's thinking I'm going to be alone. Just like the vision of I wouldn't have a family, she's not going to be a grandmother. So I think part of it was out of that; but I also think another part of it was out of that she was never able to be who she really was. (Brittany 74 – 85)

While the initial revelation was difficult, Brittany's mother quickly accepted her sexuality and is very supportive of her relationship with Kelly and their children. Her family's support and the absence of negative experiences in her life around her sexuality have contributed to her willingness to be very open about her sexuality and her family in her district.

When Brittany entered the district as a teacher, she decided to live as honestly as possible:

So I enter the profession, I go to teach at [an elementary school] and had no formal conversations about it; but I always had decided that I was going to be open about... Initially I wouldn't say, "Oh my partner Kelly" or talk about us as being a couple; but I was always very open about who I spent my weekends with. I had made that decision that if people asked me, because I would want them to be honest, that I was going to be honest. But I wouldn't put a lot of information out there that someone might not want to know; I figured they could talk to me and infer that was kind of my initial position. (Brittany 145 – 152)

Brittany initially never talked about the nature of her relationship with Kelly, only the person she was spending time with. She never experienced any overt negativity about her relationship. After about a year, Brittany explicitly revealed her sexual orientation to her teaching partner, who Brittany knew was also gay but very much closeted. Brittany continued to talk about her personal life which included her partner and allowed her colleagues to draw their own conclusions. During this time, Brittany also brought Kelly to school events and work-related social functions. About a year and a half into their relationship, her partner gave her a ring and they planned their civil union:

Actually she gave me a ring; and it was so out of the blue. We hadn't talked about having a ceremony or getting married; but we had been together a little over a year, maybe a year and a half. And she gave me a ring - she went out of town traveling and came back and gave me this ring. So she said, "Well, what are you going to say at school tomorrow?" And I was like, "Nobody's going to notice (laugh)." Me, a person who doesn't pay attention to people having wedding rings on, didn't realize that women are all over that. So of course, I had my ring on and she's like, "What are you going to say? And I was like, "I don't know. I mean really who's going to ask?" Honest to goodness about the second hour of the day, someone looked at me and said, "Oh my gosh! Are you and Kelly getting married?" And I said, "Well I guess you would call it either that or a ceremony or I'm not sure what that the politically correct term is." And that was all that happened. That opened the conversation and then throughout that whole day all my colleagues were coming up and saying, "Congratulations, I heard the news." And I mean it was really like surreal. (Brittany 175 – 189)

The announcement of their upcoming ceremony opened the door for Brittany to be open about her relationship with Kelly, both as a teacher and later in administrative positions with colleagues and with parents; she has received what she described as amazing support throughout the school community. Currently, Brittany is open about her sexuality and relationship in the district with colleagues and families; she does not directly reveal her sexuality to students but relies on families to make the decision to share the details of her relationship with Kelly when they feel their children are able to understand. When talking with adults in the school community, she does not necessarily say "I am gay" or "I am a lesbian" but she does talk about her partner, Kelly, and their children. Brittany and Kelly attend community events and school-related activities as partners. The progression for Brittany moved quickly; since she received the support from her colleagues in her first teaching position during the first year, she has since lived openly in the district. Brittany is explicitly out with her family and friends. Throughout the school community with district personnel and families, Brittany has situated herself as implicitly out.

### *Sela's journey*

Sela is a forty-eight year-old assistant principal in a mid-sized suburban school district. She has been in her current position for 2 years; she was in her previous position as assistant principal in another district for 11 years. Sela and her partner, Sandra, have been together for thirteen years; they recently completed the process to become foster parents and are actively fostering. Sela first accepted her sexuality and entered into a lesbian relationship when she was twenty-five years old:

My first relationship was at the age of 25, my first lesbian relationship. Prior to that, I kind of had some feelings; but I think I really pushed them back because it was not - the religious thing was still there. I was born and raised in a Baptist church; so Baptist family and that was still there. And I would say it was probably, to really to go to that level was at about the age of 25. Year prior to that, I was completely wanting to stay away from - I didn't want to be one of those people. I would probably be on the outside making fun of the lesbians. (Sela 53 – 59)

Sela has never disclosed her sexuality directly to her family; she has lived her life with Sandra openly with family but has never said the words “I am gay” or “I am a lesbian”.

During our conversation, Sela described her family dynamics:

Here's the funny thing about my family, they know. They invite my partner, we talk about like my living will and things like that with my partner; but no one has ever come right out and asked me and I've never come right out and told them... I feel pretty comfortable with it. My partner has come out to her family or was outed to her family; and that is a worse relationship there than I have with my family. I think it would create, and maybe this is just in my own mind because of the like I told you very conservative family Baptist church background, I think coming out to my parents would probably be more detrimental. It would probably be more in your face in their opinion then just living the life I have and being who I am right now. (Sela 72 – 75, 77 – 83)

Sela has used a similar approach to reveal her sexuality during her administrative career. She was in her last position for 11 years and has been in her current position for 2 years. Sela's experiences regarding the disclosure of her sexuality were very different in

the previous district than they have been in her current district because of her perception of the current lack of support from her administrative colleagues and her principal.

Towards the end of her last assistant principalship, Sela was explicitly out to her superintendent, principal, administrative colleagues, and a few teachers in the school; she was implicitly out to other staff in the building. She would talk about Sandra and their plans; they rode to work and often attended both school activities and work-related social events together. Sela described the progression in her previous district:

I've never been where I would change pronouns or anything along those lines; but maybe passing, just going with the flow. And just kind of talking about it, but not really putting myself out there... The last probably three or four years, explicitly out. And that was thanks to the social justice, the training that we went into. I had always felt implicitly pretty safe with the principal; it was just kind of an unspoken thing. But when we went through that experience, many of my colleagues, my administrative colleagues came and were very, very supportive; and I was very empowered to let them know what was going on in my life. (Sela 174 – 176, 160 – 165)

Sela tearfully shared one experience in particular that helped move her from implicitly out with her administrative colleagues to explicitly out. This life-changing experience occurred during a workshop called Dismantling Racism Institute for Educators where the group explored issues of oppression and identity:

[My superintendent] came to me because I struggled in that social justice because I was the only gay lesbian, bi or transgender person in the entire administrative team in the district that was there. There was one other lady that I knew that was a lesbian; but she was not there for health reasons. So I'm looking around that room and we're talking about race; but it was a very lonely place. I'm sitting there - there's assistant superintendents and superintendent - and there you're thinking, "Do I really trust to come out in this setting?" But that hill exercise, do you remember the hill exercise? When the principal, the superintendent and I were all holding hands and questions were asked and we started stretching further and further apart and the one that broke us just happened to be "Have you ever felt..." I don't something about because of the person you love or the gender of the person you love, and that broke us apart. And they turned and they looked at me - the principal I could see the tears well up in his eyes. But it was lonely because I didn't have anybody to process it with. I went back to the room and I called



[Sandra] and was like, “This is the worst place.” But what was great was they all rallied and they came to me, my administrative team, and “It’s okay. We’ve always known. It’s not an issue here. We love you.” And that was wow; and then the superintendent took me out and he said, “[Sela], I’ve always known. When you and [Sandra] came to my house to pick up a key...” (We went to his condo down - I’m sorry I’m crying). And he said, “When you came to pick up the key I felt bad that you didn’t trust me enough to bring [Sandra] in. I’ve always known and I don’t care. I just wish, I hope this empowers you.” And it was wonderful. (Sela 488 – 510)

Because of experiences like that one and others she shared, Sela felt like leaving that district was like leaving a family. But the dynamics in the district shifted and Sela made the decision to move to another district, she felt as though she had to make a change because her previous support system was torn apart. Her superintendent died unexpectedly and many of her administrative colleagues left the district with the arrival of the new superintendent. While Sela considered staying in the district and applying for the vacant principal position, she reconsidered after having a conversation with the new superintendent during which she did not feeling the level of support needed to feel comfortable staying. After that conversation, Sela decided to leave the district and accept a position as a high school assistant principal in another district, a place where she knew other lesbians who held administrative positions throughout the district.

Since making the move, Sela has not found the same support from her administrative colleagues within her school. When I asked about her level of outness and about her relationship with her current principal she said:

Here I wouldn’t say real out. I talk about my family. I talk my home life. I talk about my partner as in “we do this, we do that”. But to just tell him that I am a lesbian - I haven’t had to make any decisions in regards to that. So I would say I’m not very out - I was in my previous school very much so. (Sela 150 – 153)

Sela's perception of the lack of building-level support from her principal has stifled her willingness to be explicitly out; but she continues to live openly talking about her partner by name and their activities with administrative colleagues and staff:

If people say well "What are doing? "Well [Sandra] and I are going to Kentucky" or "[Sandra] and I are doing this." And I figure they can either ask who's [Sandra] or they know by now who [Sandra] is. And part of that is listening to some of my other colleagues bring out their significant others, talk about their significant others and what they're doing and people being okay with it and not making an issue out of it. (Sela 1284 – 1289)

When she talks about support, I believe Sela is really talking about her level of comfort in the building; the support she refers to is the support that she would need if a parent made an accusation or complained about her administrative practices or referenced her sexual orientation negatively. Throughout our conversations, Sela also referred to an air of elitism around the issues of class and physical appearance that is pervasive in the district and specifically in her high school; this perception contributes to her feelings of discomfort. Even with her discomfort, Sela and Sandra continue to attend school events; and while she has not attended any work-related social functions, Sela said that she would bring Sandra to those as well.

Sela has positioned herself as implicitly out with family and friends. Similarly, she considers herself implicitly out with district personnel both in her previous and current districts. With the majority of students and families, Sela is closeted.

#### *Adrian's Journey*

Adrian is a thirty-one year old assistant principal at a middle school in a mid-sized school district. She has worked in the same district and school from the time she began teaching until she accepted the position as assistant principal last year. She and her partner, Chris, have been in a relationship for eleven years; Chris teaches at the high

school in the district. When I asked her when she realized she was gay, Adrian said, “Probably not until I was [in my] early 20s, several years into a relationship with a woman.” (Adrian 53 – 54) Adrian has disclosed her sexuality to some of her family:

I haven’t come out to all of them. I’ve come out to my mom. The woman that I am dating now, I have been together with for 11 years. I told my mom and that one wasn’t very hard because she was open and liberal. I still haven’t told my dad; he knows we live together. He’s knows we lived together for 11 years; he says I should keep her around because she’s a good roommate... I live in this family that we just don’t talk about that stuff. So I haven’t hidden anything in years; I’m just not explicitly telling anybody. I mean anybody that wants to know can figure it out – there [are] pictures in our house. It’s all there, anybody who wanted to know that opened their eyes could figure it out; I mean we don’t hide it... Nobody has asked; I wish I would have told them 10 years ago. It’s just a continuum of excuses. (Adrian 66 – 70, 72 – 76, 78 – 79)

Adrian’s experiences with disclosing her sexuality at school have been similar to those with her family, specifically with staff. She has explicitly disclosed her sexual orientation to some staff, others have found out indirectly or drawn their own conclusions:

Among our staff, I’m out. I’ve never had to come out and say it; but a lot of them hang out with us, a lot of them know [Chris]. [Chris] has been to our Christmas party; that’s just never been an issue... She teaches in the district so we attend functions together that are usually at the high school level. She would never come to a middle school play, not because we were together but because she would have no interest in coming to a middle school play. But we go to all sorts of stuff together at the high school if we need to. And we go with [another lesbian administrator in the district]; we go with a bunch of other people. (Adrian 106 – 108, 294 – 299)

Because she has spent her entire career in the same district, in the same building, the journey began for her many years ago as a teacher and continues in her current position.

She explained her progression with staff:

I think early on it was hidden. I did the pronoun bit just as everybody else did. And then as I got more comfortable and figured out who I was safe with and who I wasn’t. Several asked, lots of others, I just stopped hiding the pronoun and never had to have the conversation - it was just known... I think my coming out phase was very gradual. This is my 11<sup>th</sup> year. Year one through five, I think I was pretty hidden. I mean I didn’t want it; I mean as hidden as a former collegiate softball

player with short hair can be, who's currently coaching the softball team at the high school. I hit all the stereotypes; but I was not opening my mouth. In just these last couple years, I've reached a new okay place; I didn't realize until I had gotten here. Where I can look back and say God I was a lot more closed, a lot more self-conscious. Just in the last couple years, I have stopped hiding or pretending or trying to, I don't know, fake it. (Adrian 308 – 311, 765 – 769, 343 – 346)

The experience of being open about her sexuality with staff has been positive, and even in some ways empowering for her. During our conversation, Adrian shared one of the ways that being out with her colleagues has empowered her:

I don't think I realized until I came out to a lot of our faculty members how much I was devaluing my relationship. I would wager to say that I don't know of a relationship that is stronger or healthier than the one I'm in; and so for a long time for me to have hidden that, I didn't realize how much I was devaluing it. So when I came out and people then see [Chris] and I together and know who we are and know how long we've been together, that did empower me. I felt good about that once it happened; and I would not have anticipated feeling good about it. (Adrian 1064 – 1070)

As a teacher, Adrian was open about her sexuality with her principal who also identified as a lesbian. Adrian has been open about her sexuality with her boss, formerly her assistant principal; for her that has been easy because he worked so closely with another lesbian administrator in the past:

It's never been awkward with me and our head principal; probably because he's known about, he's known I've been gay. He's known that I am with [Chris]; our former principal, his former boss, another lesbian. So it's always been really open; and I think his respect for [the former principal here] previously was so high that once he found out she was gay, it was just kind of secondary. And I think that's carried over a little bit; I think I have benefited from that. I think that had he and [the former principal] not gotten along or [she] not been the one who he developed this really good relationship with, I'd probably be struggling a little bit more. But I've kind of benefitted from following that; and I you know and I see that that's the case. (Adrian 449 – 458)

Adrian's experience with being open about her sexuality with her administrative colleagues and staff has been positive. She described herself as implicitly out with all staff and explicitly out with others.

### *Maggie's journey*

Maggie is a forty-six year-old principal in a large urban district; she is beginning her second year in this position, prior to that she was a principal in a small suburban school district for ten years. Maggie has been partnered with a teacher in her building for a little less than a year; previous she was married to her partner of ten years who was an administrator in her previous school. Maggie's first lesbian relationship was at the age of 36. She described coming out to her family and friends, who are very supportive, and her experience in her previous district:

It depends on where you are as far as I came out. I mean you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out - out to my family at 36, out to friends 36, out at work never anything official. Now my last district, I was involved with somebody in the district; and one point it was no secret. We had board members over at the house - it was our house, it was our Christmas party. People knew so it wasn't like a secret; but it was never like really advertised or put in anybody's face... Everybody knew; but I sure as hell wasn't admitting anything. (Maggie 89 – 94, 98)

In her previous district, Maggie lived implicitly out after she and her partner bought a house together three years into their relationship; while she did not say she was gay or lesbian directly, her partner attended school events, work-related social functions, and they rode together to and from work. Two years ago, Maggie was told that her services were no longer needed in that position; she believes her contract was non-renewed because of a small but very vocal anti-gay faction of the community paired with a weak board who wanted the conflict surrounding her sexuality to go away.

After a tumultuous and agonizing exit from her previous district, she began the process of looking for another position. That was a difficult process because of the undisclosed circumstances surrounding her exit from the previous district; there was a discrepancy between the reasons the district said Maggie was released from her duties as principal and the reasons Maggie believed she was relieved of her duties. Maggie did not tell the districts where she was applying about reasons she suspected for her dismissal; in addition, Maggie felt she was blacklisted by the Director of Human Resources in the district, who was a closeted lesbian and afraid of the repercussions of being named as a lesbian in a district that had a vocal anti-gay faction. Maggie had a reputation among her administrative colleagues as a strong leader; this reputation was instrumental in securing another administrative position:

And in the [this district] here, they just they kind of laugh - they know they got me on the freaking sale rack. [My new boss] is no fool - he's like, "You're a quality principal. Yeah, I know what happened to you. I don't care. Do you want a job?" I was like, "okay" after I swore I'd never come here - never say never. In that regard, the hard part of staying in education was finding a job because there were rumors that I had been fired. The HR director was working against me and there still are a lot of people, even if they are okay with it, do you want a lightning rod? (Maggie 554 – 561)

During Maggie's first year in her new position, she and her partner of ten years split and she began dating her current partner. In her current position, Maggie is not open about her relationship with her new partner but does not deny the fact that she identifies as lesbian. Maggie has been open about her sexuality with her administrative team and shared the following experience she had with one of her current assistant principals:

They had met [my previous partner] - they all met [my previous partner]. But one, off the record, has made very hateful comments about he'd never work for a lesbian yada yada but the two I hired... [He] still refers to me as "your principal". He'll say that to teachers, "Your principal..." One guy I've known for 20 years and Jesus he's so busy chasing skirts, he doesn't care. And I think the other guy, I

kinda tested the water with him because I hired him. Something in his interview, he had mentioned being his church and that kind of thing and I wanted to make sure I didn't have some kind of right wing person. The church that he comes from is actually very open, very religious but very approachable and open place. So I did kind of try to sense that out and feel him out for where he's going to be on that because I knew I was walking into one hater already. (Maggie 790 – 801)

Maggie believes her school community is aware of her sexuality because of her experience in the previous district; but when she refers to her personal life when talking with staff, she talks about her family or uses a plural pronoun. During our conversations, Maggie talked about the difference where she positioned herself on the out continuum in her previous district compared to her current district:

I'm not out. [In my previous district] basically, it was understood. I never made an announcement; but we also had parties and invited people to our home so it wasn't a secret. But I don't, I've never been a person to walk around and say, "oh my girlfriend or my wife" nothing like that. Do I censor with the staff, I did there definitely because there were people that were clearly uncomfortable. And the bigger picture of what I have to do is educate children and putting everybody at a discomfort level is of no use to my goal of what I'm supposed to be doing here. I can't say as I've paid that much attention to it. The biggest area where it's kind of come into play has been because I got divorced basically in December and lived together for another two months. And I lost the dogs in the divorce - the kids all knew I had Great Danes. There's no hiding it - I brought them up here. They're like, "When are you bringing the dogs? When are you bringing the dogs?" So I finally told the animal science teacher, "I don't have the dogs anymore. My friend took them and I'm not in the same house with them anymore." But I didn't tell her. I have a few people on staff that they kind of know the whole picture but not a lot just because I paid dearly before. (Maggie 816 – 831)

It is clear that the experience in her previous district has affected her willingness to live openly in her current position. Maggie understands that the knowledge of her sexuality accompanied her from her previous district and she accepts that; but she is unwilling to live as openly in her current relationship because of the previous painful, hostile experiences.

Out or Open: Choosing the Words to Disclose Our Sexuality

For the purpose of this research, I used Griffen's (1991) four identity management strategies: 1) passing; 2) covering; 3) implicitly coming out; and 4) explicitly coming out. In her research, Griffen (1991) found that participants in her study used four specific strategies to manage their identity. Each identity management strategy had specific criteria used by the gay and lesbian educators interviewed in her study. When participants were passing, they wanted their audience to believe they were heterosexual and assumed they did; in order to maintain this façade, participants lied about their sexuality and changed the pronouns of their partners when referring to personal experiences. The second identity management strategy, covering, was used by participants. When covering, participants did not lie but they did censor their language. They assumed that others saw them as heterosexual; they did not try to present as heterosexual but hid their gay or lesbian identity. When referring to personal experiences involving their partners or personal relationships, they used plural pronouns. The third identity management strategy identified by Griffen (1991) was implicitly out. When participants identified as implicitly out, they were willing to share personal information about their partners and relationship without using gay or lesbian labels. They assume that the audience knows they identify as gay or lesbian and give them permission to view them that way; but they are not willing to say the words gay or lesbian to identify themselves. Explicitly out is the fourth identity management strategy; when participants are explicitly out, they are completely out to the school community. Participants were considered explicitly out when they were willing to use gay or lesbian labels when describing their identity to others.

Similarly to Griffen's (1991) research where participants accessed all four of these strategies at different times to manage their identities, the participants in my



research also used all four identity management strategies to situate themselves on the out continuum. For participants in this study, early in their careers, they were more likely to use the strategies of passing or covering to negotiate their identities in their schools; but as they become more comfortable with district personnel and families, participants frequently used the strategy of implicitly coming out. While all participants explicitly disclosed their sexuality with district personnel at one time or another, most chose the strategy of implicitly coming out anytime they chose to reveal their sexual orientation in the school community.

During our conversations, participants explored their decisions to use the language they used to reveal their sexuality to different audiences within the school community. Throughout the interviews, participants compared implicitly coming out to the decision to live openly; contrarily, participants considered explicitly coming out the same as living completely out in their districts. For participants, the difference between implicitly out and explicitly out was the language they chose to use when revealing their sexuality or sharing their personal relationships with others.

Once participants decided to begin openly disclosing their sexuality, most did so implicitly rather than explicitly. During our interviews, all participants, except Brittany described their place on the out continuum as implicitly out with district personnel; Brittany was explicitly out with all members of the school community except students. With district personnel, seven of the eight participants preferred to describe themselves as open about their sexuality rather than out. They differentiated open versus out based on the words they used to disclose their sexuality. For participants, being open was a willingness to talk about their relationships and partners openly without censoring their

language and changing pronouns. To be considered out, participants felt they had to be willing to directly say “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” throughout the school community which included district personnel, students and families. All participants had explicitly disclosed their sexuality to a small population within the school community at one time or another but this was not the norm for them.

Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on how they chose the language to share their sexuality and honor their relationships. For participants, they considered themselves implicitly out which they equated with living their lives openly with district personnel. During one of our conversations, Adrian captured and articulated the feelings most of the participants shared when they described themselves as open about their sexuality instead of out. In this passage, Adrian reflected on the meanings the words “open” and “out” carry for her as she negotiates her identity both personally and professionally:

I think most adults who I’ve gone to that level with, I have in turn been out and very open with them. I don’t know if I like the word out, I think open’s better... I mean out is the term; I’m just saying just seems so loud... Out is loud because that was always so hard too. Like coming out day, there’s a lot of pressure on coming out. It sounds like it has to be so loud - that it has to be this big like ceremony sort of thing. And I think that stresses a lot of people out. Where it’s like just national be open with everyone day - how like, how empowering is that? It’s just kind of freeing. I’m just going to be open with you today as opposed to I’ve got something to tell you, I’m coming out... I think that the idea of coming out is more of a scream; and I think people who come out, the people wear the tutus and throw the baton at the parade, they turn people off. Because when you scream, there’s people hearing who don’t want to hear. When you’re open with people, it’s like a conscious decision, like you’re having a heart to heart with people. I just think there’s a humanity piece to being open as opposed to coming out. I haven’t thought about it before; but I was always just like the pressure thing too. That whole you should come out to your dad; it’s like I don’t want to come out to my dad, what I want to do is I want to be open. I think it makes the conversation better, makes it more meaningful. I think coming out is just so flippant. It’s like it means nothing - I’m just going to make an announcement today. Where it’s so much more than making an announcement; it’s like I’m

letting you in on something that goes to my core... I think because it's really hard to ascribe any labels to ourselves. It's easier to say what we're doing as opposed to what we are... I know that being straight doesn't have a negative connotation for most people. If you say I'm straight, it's fine. The word gay and the word lesbian, the word dyke, you name it, it's been a derogatory label. It's a little strange to slap what's been a derogatory label upon yourself and own it in a positive way. It's just weird... I just think some of the words, the only words we have to describe who we are have been tainted by history; they're just tainted... I would go the softer route; it's softer, it sounds softer to me. Because I see in so many ways, I get that being a lesbian is different; but I think in so many ways I see that people are people, relationships are relationships, love is love, sort of thing. So I think when I try to have that conversation with people, I don't like to use words that make it sound different than any other relationship, than any other loving partnership. (Adrian 1078 – 1079, 1081, 1083 – 1088, 1091 – 1103, 1114 – 1116, 1136 – 1139, 1143 – 1146, 1150 - 1155)

Over time, all participants eventually positioned themselves as implicitly out with district personnel. Sela shared how she describes herself in her district and why she has made the decisions she has to reveal details about her relationship with her partner as time has passed:

I'm just being open. I've only gone through the process of coming out to a very limited number of people... I just personally, I feel like being out is a greater fear than being found out. If I'm out and that's the first thing that people know about me, then they have preconceived notions. If I am not out explicitly and they get to know who I am, then when I am found out there's a set of experiences they have to balance against that could drive what they think. (Sela 1303 – 1304, 1311 – 1315)

For all of the participants, their sexual orientation is something that is understood in their districts. All participants have directly disclosed their sexuality to some members of their school community but none have ever made a far reaching announcement about their sexuality. For participants, district personnel have come to understand they identify as lesbian through references to their partners or through informal conversations about activities in their personal time. Lily talked about her experience:

I've never made a big pronouncement. I've just put the information out there. I worked with a couple of people for 20 years; I don't think we've ever had a

conversation about me being lesbian. They just knew that [my partner] and I adopted these children, that's what they knew... Me coming out would be the process of revealing my lesbianism to somebody; being out would be me not censoring... (Lily 1125 - 1128)

Kayla, who has longevity in her district, talked her comfort in her district:

Then you end up with somebody like me who's been in the same position for 8 years and has just kind of, it's old news now. So it is comfortable for me; and so I don't deal with it any way. I can be comfortable; I can be somewhat out without really being out and its okay. (Kayla 1085 – 1088)

Each participant gave examples of experiences they had in their district with sharing information about their relationships with district personnel. For Sela, she referred to her partner by name in conversations and people came to their own conclusions:

I live my life and I hope through those experiences that I have with people that they grow to love me for who I am. I don't have to say I'm a lesbian either - not say it or say it because I don't necessarily go to them and ask them "Are you married?" I don't say, "What are you? Who's your partner?" I get to know people for who they are individually - if they bring somebody to me and they introduce them, then that's fine. If they don't, that's fine too. And so I don't purposely, I don't think it's necessary to define who I am and for people to get to really know me for who I am because I don't hide it. I talk about [Sandra], "[Sandra] and I do this," "[Sandra and I do that]" when they ask me what I'm going to do for a weekend. I'll say, "I'm going to go to Kentucky with [Sandra]." But it's, I just, maybe it's me, something that I just don't haven't quite been ready to say yet, not to everybody. (Sela 1542 – 1554)

Maggie explained the dynamics in her district and how her previous school community came to understand the nature of her relationship with her partner:

Well it wasn't that, it wasn't talked about. Hell in [the district], Jesus they came to our home - so it wasn't like, "Hi, we're gay." It's "We're having a party at our house." So it wasn't like there was any kind of mistake that we were... Did the invitations say, "two lesbians want to invite you to a happy hour?" No but it said come to [Maggie] and [my previous partner's house] - so it wasn't necessarily hiding. And nobody ever, as they're screaming at board meetings, nobody ever said, "Are you gay?" No one ever asked, it was just kind of understood that I was and I wasn't going to stand up and go, "That's not who I am. You're so confused, [my partner] is my maid (laugh). You have misunderstood this relationship. So there wasn't any kind of denial. (Maggie 1518 – 1527)

For Brittany, she thought people throughout her district were aware of her sexual orientation after coming out in her previous position but when she moved to another administrative position in the district, she had to begin disclosing her sexuality again to staff. She shared one of her first experiences in her new position:

I just thought people knew about me coming from across the district; and one of my first days I was having lunch with different teams and someone said, “So tell me about your husband.” Because I had my ring on and I was like, “Wow, well I can’t tell you about my, I don’t have a husband to tell you about but I’d love to tell you about Heather.” And it was just like so spur of the moment; and I wasn’t even like ready for that question. But I was like, “Oh I need to make them feel like it’s not something different though.” So right away, I said, “You know what I can’t tell you about my husband because I don’t have one; but I’d love to tell you about Heather.” (Brittany 283 – 291)

Brittany positioned herself as implicitly and sometimes explicitly out with district personnel and parents. She was not opposed to sharing information about her sexual orientation with students but decided to let parents determine when their children were ready for details about her relationship with Kelly.

### Summary of Findings

For participants the emotional process of coming out both personally and professionally never ends. Participants made decisions about what to disclose about their sexual orientation in the workplace conscientiously based on reading the audience and listening for signals of acceptance. All participants positioned themselves as implicitly out with district personnel but the timeframe for disclosure was influenced by seven factors explored in Chapter Five.

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships with colleagues and staff;
- 3) Desire for lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;

- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational themes;
- 6) Perception of informal support; and
- 7) Formal protections.

Participants' willingness to reveal or confirm their sexual orientation with parents and students varied; their decisions and the six themes found in their responses to parents and students and factors influencing their choices are explored in Chapter Six:

- 1) The ways participants answer inquiries from parents;
- 2) The ways participants answer inquiries from students;
- 3) Treatment of partner in conversations and public encounters;
- 4) Understanding of oppression;
- 5) Role model responsibilities; and
- 6) Don't Ask Don't Tell: The effects of the advice and experiences of others.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPANTS’  
POSITIONING WITH DISTRICT PERSONNEL

Purpose

The purpose of Chapter Five is to share the factors influencing the way participants position themselves on the out continuum with district personnel. In Chapter Four, I introduced the participants with a snapshot of their personal and professional experiences with situating themselves on the out continuum with different audiences. In that chapter, I also explored the ways participants chose to disclose their identities, specifically the words they selected; I focused on the following questions: 1) How do participants describe their experiences with coming out to family and friends? 2) How does the way participants situate themselves on the out continuum with friends and family differ from the way they position themselves on the out continuum in the workplace with district personnel, families and students? 3) How do participants choose to disclose their sexuality in their professional experiences? What words do they choose and why do they choose these words?

In this chapter, I will expand on the themes that influenced where participants situated themselves on the out continuum with district personnel that were found in the participants’ answers to the three questions listed above. The seven primary themes affecting the participants’ positioning on the out continuum are:

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships;
- 3) Desire for lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;

- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational differences;
- 6) The perception of informal support; and
- 7) Formal protections.

In Chapter Six, I will explore the common themes found in participants' decisions to share or withhold information about their sexual orientation and personal relationships with parents and students.

#### Factors Influencing Participants' Positioning on the Out Continuum with District Personnel

##### *Theme One: Internalized messages*

During our conversations, I found participants' internalization of negative heterosexist messages grounded in society's damaging responses to individuals who identify as gay or lesbian was an important factor affecting their decisions regarding where they position themselves on the out continuum with district personnel. Participants received direct and indirect messages about the expectation to limit the amount of attention drawn to their sexuality in the workplace. This advice was given by family, friends, straight colleagues and other queer educators. The expectation of silence and covering was paired with a perpetuation of fear through negative personal experiences and the stories told in the queer community about the hurtful experiences of other gay and lesbian educators. For participants, hearing one terrorizing story of another queer educator was enough overshadow the positive experiences of several other queer educators in schools.

*Advice: Blend in*



Throughout all of the interviews, participants referred to a societal and sometimes self-imposed expectation that they refrain from drawing attention to their sexuality. In our conversations, each participant used the words “putting it in people’s faces;” the “it” referred to their sexual orientation. This terminology was often used as an explanation for participants’ decisions to withhold information about their sexual orientation. Other times, this statement was used to clarify the reasons they chose to reveal their sexual orientation or answer questions about their personal relationships in certain ways. The idea of putting their sexuality in people’s faces was used interchangeably with references to Don’t Ask Don’t Tell. The military’s policy of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell specifies that gay and lesbian members of the armed forces can serve as long as they do not implicitly or explicitly disclose their sexual orientation. The policy was written in response to the opinion of some that allowing gay and lesbian military personnel to serve openly would result in decreased performance and morale in the armed forces (Belkin, 2007). All participants referenced the United States’ military policy of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell as the unwritten expectation that governed their movement on the out continuum in their districts (Belkin, 2007). This message of silence was internalized from verbal and nonverbal messages from family, friends, and colleagues both straight and queer. Participants referenced putting their sexuality in people’s faces and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell; both had meanings that ranged from referencing their partners or directly stating that they are lesbian to being perceived as too gay or as having a lesbian agenda. These meanings and the effects of these informal expectations are explored in this section.

In our conversations, Sela talked about the military’s Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy and how that applied to her as a lesbian school administrator. She borrowed this policy

and used it to protect herself and justify the reasons why she did not directly disclose her sexual identity. Sela also used it as a way to protect her straight allies from the possibility of an interrogation that could come at any time from a board member or the community.

She explained:

It goes back to the whole thing that almost to the military thing, Don't Ask Don't Tell. Don't say, don't confirm, can't confirm; and it's funny because the principal that I worked with before, when I told you about the whole thing where a board member came and things started to happen. And we talked and we had been very close and I had said to him, "The whole thing is I feel like if you don't ask and I don't specifically say that I'm a lesbian, then if someone asks you, you can still say 'I don't know if she's a lesbian - she's never talked to me about it' and not be lying about it. And not put you in a position where you feel uncomfortable. (Sela 1513 – 1521)

Sela attributed the informal adoption of this philosophy to her parents' advice and her religious upbringing. She talked about how this approach works for her in her relationships with her family and also in her school community. Sela can live her life openly in her relationship with Sandra; however, because she has not said explicitly that she is a lesbian, the audience has the comfort of accessing that little bit of denial to convince themselves that she's not:

I think it goes back to my upbringing - that you live a life and as long as you're not... My parents had always told me "Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't make your life a problem, just live it." And I think it goes back to that and maybe it's my religious upbringing and that whole generation that we came through where being a lesbian is a problem. We talked about that before, how the younger generation feels a lot more free. And maybe sometimes, I think it's out of respect for my parents that I don't bring it up to them; because when I was growing up, it was not something that was accepted. And it was, how do I put this, the saying was 'I don't condone it but I don't condemn it'. And so I think out of respect for them, I think if I don't say to them "I'm a lesbian. I am gay. I'm in a gay relationship." that in their own minds they can still try to reason with however they want to reason with it. Often times when I think about my parents, when I think about okay I think I want to say something to them, then I also think no with their reasoning right now they... You're right, they know; but it hasn't been said to them so maybe somewhere in their little mind they're still thinking "Well you know maybe this is, just maybe [Sela] really isn't." Or if people say to them are

talking about gays or lesbians, they in their minds are still not making that connection to me. And so they're able to, I feel like, it was not something in their generation that was even remotely considered appropriate and I don't want them to think that anything that I am doing is purposely against them or their generation. (Sela 1513 – 1541)

Maggie referred to Don't Ask Don't Tell in her interview also:

I don't think anywhere anybody wants to hear about it - that's my personal belief... I think it's the unofficial military Don't Ask Don't Tell in some places. I think it's one of those things, if we could come to some common agreement and have the code - if everybody outed themselves on the same day, they wouldn't have a choice but to accept us. (Maggie 962 – 963, 965 – 968)

Maggie referred to the prevalence of gay and lesbian educators and administrators in the schools and alluded to the fact that, because of the sheer numbers of us in schools, districts and communities would be forced to tolerate our presence if we could find the courage to live openly. In her interviews, Kayla also referred to the number of queer educators in public schools. During our conversations, it was clear how she has internalized the negative messages in society about gay and lesbian educators working with children and how those internalized messages govern her behavior and her positioning on the out continuum in her school community:

I have just kind of leveled myself to the fact that this is the lifestyle that I have chosen that is not open in the public in the education world. There's the public in the education world and then there's the public in public; and it's not a comfortable place in education. There are probably more gay and lesbian teachers in education than there are straight teachers; but the American public does not want to know that. They don't want to talk about it because you're shaping those children, their children, and that's not cool. (Kayla 506 – 512)

At times, these same internalized messages surfaced in the advice given by lesbian administrators to one another. When Alex was hired in her current position as a high school principal, she was given advice from another lesbian administrator; this is

advice that governs all of her day-to-day decisions about revealing her sexual orientation in her school community. She explained:

So I would say on the continuum of in/out that I moved more toward the out at work; but when I was first coming out one of the friends that I came out to put me in contact with a lesbian administrator who then put me in contact with a lesbian high school principal to be people who could sort of help guide me through this process. And the advice I got, which I thought was very, very good advice, was to live your life but don't put it in people's faces. (Alex 169 – 174)

For both Sela and Adrian, one way of putting their sexuality in peoples' faces was forcing members of the school community to explore their feelings and beliefs about gay and lesbian issues when they would rather not. Sela explained:

I think for some people it's not in your face; it's just like a lot of different things. I think if religion, political views, some people are okay with you differing as long as that doesn't become the major, your major agenda. And some people get very uncomfortable because they haven't even explored their own beliefs about it; so they become very uncomfortable if you're asking them very explicitly to explore that belief. (Sela 1006 – 1011)

Adrian shared that she was willing to reveal aspects of her sexuality to people she feels are open to the discussion but does not want to be viewed as someone who forces members of the school community to address issues of sexuality:

It's me. All of my answers keep coming back to this cover your ass sort of thing. I just seem to live under that mantra; and I hate that I do. I never would have, this has brought that; I just feel like people who want to, who go there that can handle it, they are appropriate; and it's like I'm never going to be accused of trying to put something in somebody's face or make them deal with a conversation or something that they can't handle. I just don't want to be that person - there [are] people in our community who are like that. And there's a piece of me that appreciates that they are because they bring some awareness. And then there's that other piece of me that, it drives me nuts that they are because then everybody lumps us together as being just crazy; and it's all we talk about and care about. So I guess I just don't want to be thrown in that category. (Adrian 635 – 645)

In many ways both Sela and Adrian are concerned with being seen as lesbian administrators who are forcing a lesbian agenda by living openly and sharing their sexual

orientation as an upfront part of who they are and what they bring to a personal or working relationship. For Sela and Adrian, they are living their lives as lesbian administrators and sharing their experiences with people in the school community who signal that they are comfortable with their sexuality while attempting to eliminate opportunities for negative encounters with others in the school community by limiting the focus on queer issues and avoiding situations where they may have to share their lesbian identity explicitly.

Refraining from forcing members of the school community to actively deal with sexual identities other than heterosexuality because of the potential for discomfort was often paired with a longing to be viewed as “normal” not as stereotypical lesbians by the school community. Maggie shared:

There are the gay girls that are just like grabbing the flag and running down the street; and then other folks that try to just live their life like a normal person. I’m not looking trying to cause anybody else to be uneasy; but also don’t feel like I should be denied anything. But I have not been of the mindset of looking to make a point. Sometimes you’ll have folks that are just very boom in your face, that’s not my deal. (Maggie 764 – 769)

During our conversations, Kayla shared her thoughts on how others might perceive her stereotypically as a building leader:

Yeah, because I worry sometimes. Because one of those stereotypes of being gay is that you, you’re dominant, you’re pushy, you’re always in control and you’re that butch that stereotype; so I think sometimes, especially as an administrator, I fight that. (Kayla 226 – 236)

Sela had some tension over this internal conflict: understanding the need for some educators to live out and question practices and appreciative of their willingness to do so but concerned over the spotlight this places on gay and lesbian educators who prefer to

live more quietly. Sela talked about how she believed this reinforced negative stereotypes:

I do believe there are people who can't pass - their make-up is not to pass. Yeah, I think so and sometimes I envy those people and sometimes they anger me. Sometimes I envy them because they live their life just as free as a bird - it doesn't matter. They're going to say what they want to say; it's not just always with the lesbianism, it's with their lives in general. They're going to say what they're going to say. They're going to fight back when they feel like they need to fight back. They don't let anything go unspoken. And then sometimes they anger me because I think they bring more attention then to our lifestyle, lesbianism than I really want to be brought to me at that point in time... I think there are some colleagues that will really say things that push people's thought process - what we might call stereotypical. And sometimes it's just kind of aggravating like "Do you have to be this stereotypical? Do you have to give us all such a bad name?" (Sela 1340 – 1348, 1383 – 1386)

Lesbian administrators' behavior, those who question heterosexist practices too aggressively or who are seen as too stereotypically queer, too gay, is in direct conflict with the advice given by many queer educators. Alex talked about the advice she was given and the unwritten rules of not being too gay:

The one I was recommended, the live your life but don't put it in people's faces, to not be overly aggressive about it. I have a good friend of mine in [another district] who's not an administrator per se and you talk about creating your own sense of rules - we both knew of an assistant principal who was very out. We were both made uncomfortable by it because he was all gay all the time - too gay. Which was probably us creating rules for how gay people are supposed to be out in society - you're in education you shouldn't be... I think that I probably live by the rule of not being too gay, not being too whatever. (Alex 934 – 941, 942 – 943)

Participants believed the combination of the negative lesbian stereotypes and the practice of questioning heterosexist policies was directly associated with having a lesbian agenda. Throughout our interviews, participants referenced others' perception of them having a lesbian agenda as a reason for both living more closeted and not questioning heterosexist or homophobic practices in their districts. Advice from other queer administrators for those entering the profession or moving to a new school district was to

guard against the perception of having a queer agenda. For example, when Sela moved from one district to another, she conversed with other lesbian administrators in the district and was given the following advice:

I had conversations with people who were here that were gay and said “Talk to me about this - what’s going on?” And basically I was just told, “You know what just go in and do a good job. Don’t try to be somebody you’re not. Don’t take on any causes... Basically when I came here, I was told that people are accepting but don’t make it an issue... I think what they’re talking about, making it an issue is, if you are, we talked about wearing it as a label, if that is the crux of what you use in your decision making or if when there is an issue if you say “Well I’m a lesbian and I think that this is totally against what I am as a lesbian.” Or if you say, “Well I know so and so and so and so are in administration and we’re all gay.” Basically trying to create, basically saying this is who I am using this as the person who I am and using it as the crux of all your decision making as opposed to just being the well rounded individual that you are. (Sela 1447 – 1450, 253 – 254, 256 – 263)

As an assistant superintendent and the white mother of two African-American sons, Lily reflected on her willingness to be a spokesperson for queer issues in her district by using social justice issues as a platform and the effectiveness of her message:

I’ve been marked with a social justice agenda; I’m not looking to be in people’s faces necessarily... Most pronounced would be race; but I think there’s an assumption that immediately behind that is going to be issues of sexuality. I am the least effective spokesperson on social justice in [the district]. One it’s sort of assumed and that it would be me; consequently, it needs not to be me because it’s not a single person issue. That’s actually worked in terms of gaining more allies and more voices and stuff; but it has taken a while. The other is that people don’t know how to separate me as a parent and me as a lesbian; it’s like you know men are the best voices on sexism, I am not the best voice on sexual orientation and I’m not the best voice on race. (Lily 660 – 662, 665 – 673)

Adrian is a new administrator working in the same district where she taught. She reflected on her progression as a teacher in her willingness to have open conversations about her sexuality with district personnel and foreshadowed her potential movement as a building administrator:

I got a lot more comfortable with the things I said and the conversations I had teaching as I was here a while and got established. I think as I'm an administrator longer and become more established, the same comfort level's going to come. [I'm] just not interested right now while I'm still in the very early stages of building a reputation to burn bridges or to put anybody off. I think right now I'm just trying to be good at what I do; and then as I'm good at what I do, I can start having those kind of courageous conversations. It's seen as more acceptable when I have those because I'm not trying to just, I don't know, run a lesbian crusade here. (Adrian 910 – 918)

All of the negative internalized messages discussed affected participants' day-to-day decision making with regard to their positioning on the out continuum, comfort with revealing their sexual orientation, and courage to address heterosexist policies and practices in their districts. Some participants lived openly with administrative colleagues and staff but were unwilling to address systemic issues in the district because of the fear of being marked as having a lesbian agenda.

### *Fear*

All participants' referenced fear as their primary consideration when deciding how open to be about their sexuality in their position as lesbian administrators in their school districts. Participants shared fears about losing their positive reputations and personal relationships, but the strongest fear was the terror of losing their jobs. When asked what factors affected their decisions to be less open about their sexuality with district personnel, both Sela and Lily decisively said fear: "Fear that at any point in time somebody could find out and use it against you to either get you fired or to just create total havoc in your job" (Sela 1149 – 1150). When asked what impeded her development of a positive lesbian identity as a school administrator, Lily responded: "So what impedes? Fear, I mean fear and having been hurt. Which I don't scare easily, but I have been terrorized. So I'm in recovery" (Lily 1090 – 1091). Similarly, Kayla talked about



the tension that surfaced when she was ready to disclose her sexuality and the anxiety that prevented that revelation:

There's still that, it's like pulling on a string on me that's attached and when I get ready to be that person and stand on that mountain it's like bluh hello (inaud) you have a state license. I joke about that all the time... I'm perpetually afraid of not being able to keep my house, keep my car, keep my freedom - my life the way I understand it. I don't want (inaud) like that I want to be able to get to do what I love to do for the rest of my career; and when I retire, I'll go do something else where I can stand on a mountain and scream about... (Kayla 1101 – 1103, 1105 – 1109)

This fear of loss prevented Kayla from being her authentic self in her leadership position. Because she loves her career, she felt she had to compromise authenticity and justify her decision by promises of a future career where she can live openly. Although Kayla's fears have not been personally realized, she witnessed firsthand Maggie's excruciating experience with loss of employment in her previous district which dramatically affected her.

Lily had fears that were realized and internalized during personal experiences and others during her time as a school administrator several years ago. She shared some of these experiences:

I had a couple of experiences that gave me a healthy sense of fear. One had nothing to do with sexuality but my high school years ended in some racial tension that carried death threats and fires and stuff that I thought, well okay. Then I had been held at gunpoint when I was in college and it was an attempted rape; but it was, it turned out to be nothing more than being held at gunpoint but that was enough. Then I had this church experience where in the end being lesbian was something to boo. And the fact that at the time there was a conversation about could lesbians adopt children and be parents; and the answer was no, legally that was still difficult to do and there was rousing applause and whooping and hollering. And I thought, "Oh man, this is really not safe." I had friends who were getting fired; and I had friends who were getting stalked. And I was absolutely a part of a closeted lesbian community and a lot of them were women trying to make their way in leadership roles. (Lily 359 – 371)

During our conversations, Lily shared her reflections about the experiences that resulted in her realization that all of her experiences had resulted in some internalized fear:

This was my own fear. I don't think I ever realized how afraid I was until well I got hit with a, there was a legal issue when I was leaving that had to do with the fact that the superintendent didn't want me to leave and tried to entrap me. And I had to get an attorney; and so I had to tell the attorney, "okay and I'm lesbian and the superintendent knows it and I don't know if this is going to get pulled out." And in the end, the board wrote me an apology because the whole thing had been, I mean it became clear to them that I had followed all protocol/procedure and everything in getting another job. But at the time, I wasn't here, I am now going to a new job and I have to get a freaking attorney to leave without a dishonorable discharge from [the district] because and I didn't know if sexuality was going to be the trump card for me or not... That was the first time that I ever thought it could be a public threat; up until then, I just didn't feel emotionally safe. And I just didn't really spend that much time studying it; I really didn't know life any other way, it wasn't a question. (Lily 420 – 431, 433 – 435)

Later in our conversation after she had shared some of her experiences and how they affected her, Lily explored her strained relationship with a former superintendent and how his treatment of her and his eventual departure from the district led her to understand how fear had traumatically affected her and how she was beginning to recover:

And that there was nothing in my performance, even though [my former superintendent] was always trying, that would give him issue; but frequently what he went after were his perceptions of my relationships with other administrators. So he was always, you know what, in the last five years I bet I took ten years off my life; but I really felt that I didn't want to leave for a lot of reasons. So he kept me under a thumb; I think he fully knew well he was doing it. And by the same token, the threat was social justice; it wasn't me as a lesbian. But I think he was so uncomfortable with me that anything available was being used. And I worked so damn hard to be "normal" and to be unthreatening that he became a stronger spokesperson in some social justice arenas than I did, go figure. But I'm aware, I've been aware this week of some damage on some things and I'm thinking, what is wrong with my thinking on this; and I know I've just gotten, I've just gotten too afraid... Well the thing that I've been aware of this week is that because of that fear, silence had become a habit; and so I'm I feel like I'm slowly beginning to peel off some stuff. And one of the things I'm having to monitor is the feelings that come with the peeling off; because I can go to rage pretty quickly. And of course that does nobody any good; so then I have to process that which of course I do by myself and it means I might lose an ally while I'm trying to figure that

piece out so I can re-enter in some sort of sane, not the crazy (inaud) screaming lesbian way. (Lily 829 – 839, 843 – 850)

### *Accusations*

While exploring the idea of the participants' fear, two specific subordinate themes related to accusations surfaced: fear of an accusation of acting inappropriately with a same-sex student and the fear of being accused of behaving in a way that encouraged students to identify as gay or lesbian. The assertion that there is a relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia, unsupported in the professional literature but frequently referenced in our society's anti-gay rhetoric, emerged during conversations with participants as a fear of accusations of inappropriate contact with students. Adrian shared during one of her interviews:

I think that there are not many professions that touch the lives of kids more than ours. And probably the next one closest is pastors and priests; and we can't escape that if those are the two professions and one of them continually is getting nailed for sexual abuse of kids, that the other one is not a lot more cautious to make sure that they're safe and not doing anything to get an accusation because of it. So yeah, I think our closet, I think the door on our closet is a lot harder to open. People are a lot less willing to pop on out of there. (Adrian 985 – 991)

This fear affected the participants' willingness to come out to students and their comfort living openly regarding their sexuality with district personnel. Adrian elaborated about how the fear of potential accusations affected her:

My biggest hang up is always feeling as though I could be accused of something; I don't have that fear with the staff. So I think it's my own hang up, I don't think it's the kids; but I think that's always where my head goes with the kids. You know, like how would you know my breasts are hanging out if you weren't looking at them? And you're one accusation away from just being a headline; and that scares you sometimes with kids. I've had no fear of it with [staff] and I really have little fear of it with the kids. The ones who know me would never say it; but they don't all know me. (Adrian 435 – 442)

In her response, Adrian began passionately about her fear of an accusation specifically from a student; but as she continued, she rationalized that the feelings associated with fearing an accusation are her own, not derived from previous experiences or anything she believed would likely happen. But the fear of an accusation is real enough for her that it enters her mind during her conversations with female students:

I just want to be really careful with what words I choose to say to them so that if those words are repeated to parent who has put together that I'm a lesbian, that the parent doesn't question why I did what I did, why I said something to their kid about their breasts hanging out. So I think I pick my words well. I know when I'm having a conversation on a sensitive topic, I'm really cautious and pick my words well; and it's always that level. (Adrian 528 – 533)

Adrian's tension around balancing her sexuality, the students' knowledge of her sexuality and conversations she has with female students is different yet similar to Kayla's fears regarding the community's perception of her sexuality and fears she speculates they have because she is working with impressionable students:

I have acquaintances, people who I know through other people, who work for major power corporations in [this city] who are completely out at work. They have partner benefits. It's very different; I think again when it boils down to [it] you're shaping young children's lives - there thoughts, their feelings. When you have control of things like that, people freak out with what you do behind closed doors. (Kayla 1245 – 1250)

Kayla would never want to be accused of encouraging a student to identify as gay or lesbian by someone in the community; because of her perception of the community's fear surrounding issues of sexuality, she believes this is possible. Kayla discussed her fear:

That's just me. It's just still that it is that fine line to me - if I start walking around telling kids, "I'm gay, it's okay." That's when you get misconstrued in the community because it's the telephone game. I love what I do for a living. I admit it's hard sometimes; but I love what I do. I don't really want to do anything to risk that; I want to get to keep doing what I'm doing. (Kayla 671 – 675)

Maggie shared a similar fear:

Don't recruit. I think the unofficial rules are really just don't make trouble. It's like the military, don't make trouble, don't stick it in people's faces, don't... I think more so maybe with high schoolers because they're at that age where they're trying to figure themselves out; I think we're more so seen as a threat like, "You validate my kid being gay. They wouldn't be gay except they know you are." And you're like, "Well." (Maggie 1151 – 1156)

For participants, the fear of accusations of inappropriate behavior related to their sexuality affected their positioning on the out continuum with all members of the school community.

#### *Experiences of other queer educators*

The queer community is small; the queer educators' community is even smaller. We share our stories, good and bad; we also share our fears, perceived and realized. The participants are part of this community of queer educators and their decisions about how much and when to reveal information about their sexuality to colleagues were influenced by the experiences and advice from other queer educators. Lily shared a story about a former Teacher of the Year winner in her district:

We had a Teacher of the Year one year, a gay man, and he addressed his experience in [the district] as a gay man in his opening of school speech. He did it because he wanted people to consider that there are things we could still do to improve our inclusiveness; and that there are things we could pay attention to. Like when he drove in his convertible and was spit on by kids passing in another car. Well on one hand, people were touched because they had worked with him for years and they didn't know that he had all these experienced. On the other hand, people were pissed because that wasn't what they wanted to hear on the opening day. They considered it to be a political opportunist kind of thing. So I do guard against being the lesbian the person, the lesbian administrator, and the person of political persuasion who's also the lesbian administrator... I read the speech in advance. I was nervous for him; and I could feel the tension around me because I was sitting with board members who were not comfortable and not happy. And truthfully, had he asked my advice, I would have asked him to think about whether or not he thinks that's the opening of school message; but he viewed it as his one chance to say something and he tried to put it into a constructive. The question is, did he?... And I don't know that this opening of school speech did that for the arena of sexual orientation. (Lily 1151 – 1161, 1165 – 1170, 1181 - 1182)

During our conversations, Maggie shared a story about the same Teacher of the Year winner and his experience after giving the speech Lily referred to in her story:

[That district] I think is pretty safe; but then also go back a few years where their Teacher of the Year outted himself and [the principal] tried to heal him. The guy left the following year. He outted himself in his Teacher of the Year speech and friends talked about how you could see people come up and some that would have normally gone up to congratulate him didn't because all the sudden he had the "G". And the guy was gone from that district within a year; and story tells that [the principal] would bring him in and, "Do you need to see a counselor? And I love [the principal], [the principal's] a great guy to sit and have beers with, but [he] is homophobic based on everything I hear. When you bring somebody in and try to heal them – [that district] is, I think, an accepting district but I also think people are cautious. I know some principals there have been very blatant about, "Yeah, I'm gay" and they've told their schools - some places it's been fine and other places I think it scared people. (Maggie 944 – 957)

Lily and Maggie work in different districts yet have access to the same narratives and shared similar stories about the experiences of a gay-identified Teacher of the Year winner.

When participants worked in the same district and witnessed each other's negative experiences firsthand, it affected them profoundly. Kayla described the experience:

My first principal was I believe the most successful in our community. I mean every district's different; but in our community the most successful when she was more in the closet. They were guessing and the more she came out and was comfortable, the more ammo they had to fire at her. (Kayla 808 – 812)

Kayla believes her principal was fired because of her sexuality; living this experience with her affected her dramatically. Prior to this experience, Kayla was willing and even eager to share her sexuality with her school community; watching her principal be crucified changed her:

I think it would no matter what building I was in or what profession. To watch others in front of you have to struggle makes you guarded in what you do and

what you talk about... I think I'd still be guarded because of who I am; but I don't know if I'd be as guarded because I was ready to go out and scream from the mountaintop. (Kayla 1285 – 1287, 1289 – 1290)

The loss of her principal changed the way Kayla felt about disclosing her sexuality; it also influenced her willingness to be her authentic self both in relationships and in her presentation of self:

I've always analyzed my clothing and the way I wear my hair and everything; but I do think I analyzed it, I think I've almost analyzed it more since that situation was finished and done. Now I'm in a sense alone in the building; we do have gay teachers, there are other gay teachers in the building. But I'm the administrator, the one administrator, so now it's we talked last time about the whole, it's been a little change in my wardrobe, a little bit I dress a little more professional, it's less khakis. So I think yeah, I have analyzed it, yeah. (Kayla 1191 – 1197)

Although Kayla's experience was negative, other participants shared the positive experiences of other queer administrators in their community and how that affected their willingness to proceed more openly about their sexuality which are discussed later in this chapter. It was evident that for participants, negative experiences affected participants more profoundly than positive experiences.

### *Theme Two: Relationships*

All participants referenced the importance of leaders developing positive relationships in the school community and their decisions to come out were influenced by how their decisions might affect relationships. When asked about their leadership styles, all participants cited building relationships with members of the school community as a focal point of their leadership style. All participants described their leadership styles as collaborative or facilitative; with both leadership styles, relationships are paramount to success. When deciding how much to reveal about their sexual orientation, participants considered: 1) the importance of establishing a relationship prior to disclosing their

sexuality; 2) how hiding their relationships created a barrier in building stronger relationships; 3) the comfort they had with the audience and their perception of the audience's comfort with homosexuality; 4) their reputation within the district and how the disclosure would affect their reputation; and 5) other signals of potential acceptance from the audience.

*Building relationships prior to disclosing sexuality*

All of the participants spent time building meaningful relationships with district personnel prior to disclosing their sexual orientation. The time that lapsed between meeting the person and revealing their sexuality was important to participants for several reasons. This time allowed participants to read the situation for signs of potential for acceptance from the other person and for an opportunity for the other person to signal their acceptance indirectly through conversations and sharing experiences. During this period of relationship building, prior to revealing their sexual orientation, participants believed the other person in the relationship became familiar with other aspects of their lives without what participants believed was the potentially negative cloud of their lesbian identity. Sela shared how building relationships prior to disclosure affected her:

Once people accept you for who you are and they don't care about any of the other parts of it, that's almost like you were talking about before that unconditional love or unconditional acceptance, and that they can handle anything else that comes their way or is thrown their way – "It's okay, we like you for who you are. We care about you for who you are. (Sela 1686 – 1690)

During her interviews, Adrian shared how building relationships and establishing a positive reputation prior to revealing her sexual orientation contributed positively to the way district personnel accepted her. She also reflected on how it may be different for another lesbian administrator coming into the district later in her career:



I think because I was known here beforehand, my sexuality is very secondary to a reputation that's been built for years. Where somebody else coming in who looks the part, dresses the part, acts the part, that's going to be kind of at the forefront. They almost have to dispel any negative connotations that may be there; where I think I dispelled those a long time ago. It's like oh watching [me] grow up here, "Do you think she might be? I think she may be. The hair's gotten shorter." And whatever. (Adrian 484 – 490)

For Alex and other participants, building relationships prior to disclosure gave them an chance to put a face on the word lesbian. In personal relationships, they were humanized: not just lesbian school administrators but lesbian school administrators that their school communities knew and characterized in other positive ways. Alex talked about the process of humanizing and working to erase the bias associated with being lesbian:

The movie *Milk*, we talked about another time but his belief that everyone should be as out as they can be to people they work with and people they lived around because as soon as they knew you as individual then a lot of the biases fall away, the fear or the unknown other. There's part of me that knows or feels that even if it's an unstated or the worst secret in [this community], that my living a normal life, my having the ethical standards and beliefs that I have and just being, allows people to perhaps throw away some of the stereotypes that they might hold. I venture to say that my secretary, I am probably the first gay person she's ever interacted with on a regular basis. So that has to have affected how she see's that community. (Alex 1502 – 1510)

Sela shared two experiences she had with colleagues in her previous school district: how one of her colleague's had a change of heart because of their relationship and how her administrative colleagues supported her after she came to a place where she was comfortable sharing her sexual orientation with them:

The very religious co-worker who doesn't want to accept the our sexuality; but however when she found out that the lack of a policy could mean that I could lose my job because there's no protection, came in and had the conversation with me about how that bothered her and that wasn't fair. Because she knew me and humanized it - it was no longer the bible and the church talking about it, it was a person that she knew and connected with and that she liked. So that's what I see when I look at successes. And my colleagues saying to me after social justice,

coming in and support saying, “It’s okay. We know and it’s no problem.” And then we all become that family where it doesn’t matter. We all go do stuff together – husbands, wives, partners - we all go do stuff together and nobody questions it, nobody even looks differently at you or thinks differently of you. And if you have to go because your partner’s father’s had a heart attack and you have to leave, it’s understood. And there’s no question and there’s no having to explain it - it’s just understood. Those are comforts and successes and things [have] helped people have to look at things differently, maybe change their perspective and start to see people differently. (Sela 1414 – 1429)

For all of the participants, the technique of building relationships prior to revealing their sexuality has been successful; and therefore, they continue to rely on it. It is difficult to say how people in the school community would react to the participants if they shared their sexuality up front because most have not. None of the participants shared experiences where they decided to remain closeted because the other person in the relationship was homophobic. Although she did initially, the only participant who does not currently censor her language when initially talking about her family in her school community is Brittany; throughout our conversations, Brittany said that the reception she received from the school community had always been positive regarding the acceptance of her partner and family.

### *Barriers to relationships*

As participants were building relationships with members of the school community, many realized that by not sharing their sexual orientation, they were creating barriers in their relationships. This realization typically resulted in more open dialogue within the relationship about the participants’ relationships and families. For most participants, this meant a change in the language they used when referring to their partners. Participants did not come out by saying “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” but began living more openly. Instead of changing pronouns and referring to their partners’ as

friends, participants began talking about their partners as their partners and referred to them as such in conversations. During our interviews, Alex shared how she realized there were barriers and how she overcame those barriers to build deeper relationships:

When I first got hired I did the whole plural pronoun game - they or singularizing or she became a friend, changing the stories You can tell, I mean there's difference in tone and I was not out at all at work. And I knew and I could feel it that it put a little bit of [a] barrier in my ability to create the relationships I wanted with my colleagues. Because to me, it is important to me to be friends with the people I work with... I knew that in my first year that I wasn't going to have the relationship I wanted to with my peers, my other administrators, because there was that barrier. Because [my assistant principal] had a wife at that time, he didn't have a kid yet; and you want to go out to dinner, well if he doesn't know she exists the four of us can't go out to dinner. If they just invite me, then do I leave [my partner] behind? And that didn't evolve to that point and my relationship with [my assistant principal] and with a number of my administration is a lot deeper now because it is on a personal level. (Alex 82 – 87, 476 – 483)

Lily is currently in a central office position and has not been a building administrator for over twenty years but she reflected on how she approached building relationships as a building administrator and speculated on the possibility of what her relationships could have been if she had been more open about her personal relationships:

The fact that I might not have been as forthcoming about myself did not keep me from asking them and if I thought the opening was there to continue to engage. I felt like I had a lot of information about people's lives; and I think for the most part, because I was the boss, there was permission for them not to know as much about me. I think though some of that, some of that guardedness on my part was fear; so I don't really know what some of those relationships could have been. (Lily 1282 – 1288)

For participants, hiding their sexual orientation in professional relationships created barriers to the relationship progressing beyond a cordial acquaintance. In some cases, when participants felt this tension, they implicitly disclosed their sexuality. For others, the risk was too great and they chose not to disclose their sexual orientation.

*The comfort of others*

The need for others to be comfortable with participants and with their sexuality was one of the most cited reasons for not disclosing their sexual orientation directly in the school community. This desire for others to be comfortable usurped the participants' need to be comfortable as their authentic selves in their positions. Participants felt it was their responsibility as building leaders to ensure the comfort of all of the members of the school community under their supervision. This created a tension for participants: they wanted to include their partners in their professional experiences but felt compelled to ensure everyone's comfort. Adrian shared her experience:

It's a drawback that I have to really think about whether or not I want my spouse to go places that I know other people's spouses are going... Whether or not we're going to a place that's going to be comfortable or we're going to be around people that are comfortable, sure. I'm not one that really enjoys making other people uncomfortable. I know some people that are okay with that; they're like if they can't deal with that screw them. I wish I had more of that in me but it bothers me to make people uncomfortable. I'm not comfortable with knowing that I'm making other people uncomfortable. I pride myself on really making people feel comfortable, regardless of what they're going through or what they've got going on or who they are. It's just not my game to do that; but I think that's a disadvantage. (Adrian 1019 – 1020, 1022 – 1030)

Like Adrian, Lily went through the process of reflecting and rationalizing during our conversations, while the comfort of others is her focus, can members of the school community truly be comfortable with her if they are uncomfortable with her sexuality?

She shared:

Well it's important that they're comfortable with me. So here's the illusion, first of all is that true and secondly if it's not is it because I am separate from my lesbianism? Is it possible to be comfortable with me and not be comfortable with my lesbianism? And I would suspect that's true and over time it sort of wears down; but we worked hard. I like to have a good time with people and I like to be able to laugh with them. (Lily 877 – 881)

Brittany discussed the need for others to be comfortable in the school community but she used a different approach. Rather than refraining from living as her authentic self, she

chose to use humor to help others feel more comfortable; she found this approach helpful in challenging bias in an unthreatening way:

I use humor. I use humor to make people more comfortable; and I use humor as an avenue for then being able to shift. “Yeah, let’s totally think about this, every gay person I know wears flannels and a shirt western looking shirts. Really? Do you really think that’s true?” It’s more like I’m not confronting them I’m more thinking out loud... Not threatening, I never want to like make them feel uncomfortable about something they might say. And I frankly want them to continue to bring stuff to me so that I can, even if it’s looking like I’m poking fun at myself, using that to help them understand the bigger... That is kind of stressful - if I stop and think about it, a lot of times I’m just a do-er and then I reflect five steps later and go oh. So when I think about that, that if I am the only person who has a sexual orientation different from them in their life and you look at all these different people that come in and out of here that makes me... Because I want them to have a positive perception of non-traditional relationships families, some of those things that they don’t, not they don’t but people in general think that there’s no commitment, we’re going to teach [our son] to be gay - so I try through conversations to really help them to see it differently. (Brittany 716 – 720, 722 – 733)

Brittany used humor; but regardless of the strategy used, it was important for all participants that their colleagues and staff were comfortable in their presence. Participants were willing to sacrifice their own comfort and authenticity to ensure others were at ease.

### *Reputation*

During our conversations, participants referenced the need to focus on building and maintaining a positive reputation as a fair, hardworking administrator who made decisions in the best interest of students, not based on a lesbian agenda. Building a positive reputation as a person and as an educator was important to participants prior to implicitly or explicitly revealing their sexual orientation. For some participants, including Adrian, there was a belief that when people find out you’re gay, it could change their

opinions of you as an administrator. The time spent on building a positive reputation was helpful in overshadowing this potentially negative reaction. Adrian explained:

It might be image. It goes back to just I'm a pleaser; and I think there's a piece of me that just doesn't want to disappoint people. And so when I have an image that I feel like is pretty positive I built, I don't want anybody to find out that I'm gay and have them then change their image of me because of that. We have a politically split town, it would change some people's opinions. (Adrian 473 – 477)

Adrian expanded on the importance of building a positive reputation for herself and what that means for other lesbian administrators:

When you're in this job, you build a reputation for yourself. And when you have a history of making the right decision, at the right time, that's kids-centered, that's school focused, that builds for itself and so you become a positive administrator. And then when people really look at who you are and they realize you are also this gay woman, that then bodes well for other gay women administrators. But I think that it's about doing your job right; and when you do your job right, you get a positive reputation and then the other titles that you have, I think you help those. (Adrian 686 – 692)

Abby's experience was similar; for her it was essential to work hard and prove her capabilities as an effective administrator, then when people in the school community found out about her sexual orientation, they weighed her sexuality with her reputation and it became a non-issue:

I think it was different early on; I think it was horrifying, not wanting anyone to find out, really feeling like... needing to prove myself which I probably would have felt that way anyway but there was that in there. And then I would say the longer I've been in, the less of an issue it's become; it's just kind of more, I think people here know me as who I am and that's just a small piece of who I am; but I mean as I said that's taken a really long time. (Abby 536 – 542)

For participants, their job performance was paramount and directly tied into their reputation as school administrators. When asked, none of the participants believed their districts would cite their sexual orientation as a reason for termination but all believed any holes in their performance left them vulnerable and could be potentially career

ending. When Lily was asked what it means to her to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian, she referenced reputation and performance:

When I asked Lily what it means to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian: “It means that I walk with, I walk in a world with multiple identities, some of which are compartmentalized and some of which are not. I think it gives me a particular insight into subtly, nonverbal code language. It probably gives me some skills related to safety other identities. One other thing, this seems like a firm grasp of the obvious, it’s really important to be very, very good. In the beginning when probably my homophobia controlled me more than I like to think it does now, I was aware that my job security could be vulnerable; and therefore, I should never cut corners or do anything that would cause one to think that there would be another reason for me to have a job threatened that wouldn’t necessarily be because I’m lesbian, but could be coded as performance. So I just made sure it wasn’t. (Lily 1221 – 1231)

For these lesbian school administrators, building a positive reputation began as teachers and continued into their positions as administrators. Three of the eight participants became administrators in district where they were teachers first; the other five participants accepted administrative positions in school districts where they had not established themselves prior. In taking positions in new school districts, they had to begin building their reputations as new administrators. Sela talked about how being a new administrator in a new district affected her:

Yeah, I’m not from [this community]. I didn’t teach in [this district]. I didn’t come up through [this district]. So people haven’t gotten to know me... When I look at some of the gay administrators in this district, yes I think it’s made a huge difference. They’ve established themselves as somebody other than the gay administrator that they are now. They’ve established themselves either as a student that came up through the district and everybody got to know them and love them. Or they started off as a teacher who everybody got to know and now they’re where they are right now. (Sela 1126 – 1127, 1129 – 1134)

The five participants who did not “grow up” professionally in the districts where they currently work believed there was an advantage to working in a district as a teacher prior to moving into an administrative position in that same district specifically for establishing

their reputation and support system which was also a concern for participants who considered leaving their current districts to accept positions in other districts.

*Signals of potential acceptance: Weighing the risks and the rewards of disclosure*

For all participants, the decision to reveal their sexual orientation to district personnel was influenced by their assessment of the risks associated with disclosure and the potential personal rewards of revelation including feelings of empowerment, deeper friendships and freedom from the exhaustion of living two separate lives. Throughout our conversations, participants described the conditions that precipitated the increase in comfort that eventually led to disclosure. Participants considered the audience, the setting, the audience's sense of politics and previous conversations. Sela shared her process for reading the situation:

We have to read situations. Initially when you're first becoming, you first realize that this is who you are; and in my case, was so completely different than how I was raised, you had to kind of read situations. Even now I have to read a situation when I'm talking with a parent or a community member or even a colleague in terms of "Okay, where is this person with this? Are they accepting and they're okay? Or is this something I'm going to have to work on with them, for them to get to know me a little bit better?" (Sela 1747 – 1753)

Adrian's experience was similar; she described how she reads the audience and how she decides whether to share her sexuality with staff in her building:

If there's ever a question or a comment from a staff member, I think that... I think it comes down to me reading the audience. If it's said if somebody's asking me a question and seems like they're pretty open and pretty cool with it, if they have the guts to ask I have no problem telling them the truth, none. Whether they did that implicitly or explicitly, I don't care. I just feel like if they have the guts to ask, if they're open enough to ask, then they can handle the answer. (Adrian 601 – 606)



One of the factors that affected Alex's decision to share information about her personal relationship was the location where the conversation occurs and the people that are present:

The other part is the setting; if it's just me and the teacher or me and the whoever sitting here, I am more likely and I probably would, even in that category of kind of a newer teacher, refer to my partner. If I'm standing and it's the English office with that same person, I'm less likely to do it. So it's a little how public the space is; but here's the thing, I would say that enough people probably know. (Alex 448 – 460)

While Alex considered the setting for the conversation; she also thought about the depth of her relationship with the person and what she knew about their politics:

One is how close of a relationship do I have with them? Like do I chat with them a lot? Do I feel comfortable with them? Do I feel they could be a friend if we weren't in this particular situation? Second is, do I have a sense of their politics? [A] lot of times you can't really tell; sometimes you know enough by things they've said that you think well I might not want to bring it up. And then it depends on what we're talking about. I would say that the beginning probably no one but now I would say it's how close a relationship do I have with that teacher. Like we have some new teachers who I don't know particularly well; and so I don't necessarily, kinda sad isn't it, it's not that I intentionally avoid it, I just don't go there when the opportunity presents itself. (Alex 438 – 447)

Like Sela, Adrian and Alex, Abby also has a set of criteria she uses to determine if someone is safe; she considers conversations where he or she might have revealed some personal bias, not just regarding sexuality but in terms of race and gender as well. When I asked what goes into her thinking when deciding to disclose her sexuality, Abby shared:

I'm sure I have a checklist. Well a lot of it's probably just affective or emotional; as far as a feel. I'm sure other pieces of it are things I would hear them say - any kind of bashing comments and not only about sexuality issues but that would be about race, it would be about gender, looks that kind of stuff. I would probably end up outing myself by you know having a conversation with them about do you really realize what you're saying? Now again, I've evolved to that; in the beginning there's no way I would have made a comment. I would have just eaten it. (Abby 207 – 214)

Sela had great concern over sharing information about her sexuality with district personnel because of the risk that they could use that information later in a negative way. She talked about her concern and how she became more trusting of people's intentions by listening for signals that they are going to be accepting:

Very scary, it is. Because it's I feel like I have to be extremely trusting of those individuals; because if the tide turns and they get angry with you, are they going to then take that information they have and use that information against you?... I listen for an acceptance in terms of the discussion we're having. And a lot of times, I listen for them to discuss whether they know somebody who is; because those are those subtle clues that they'll throw out there to you that, "I'm okay with this." And it's like they're reaching out to you and then the response... (Sela 192 – 194, 197 – 200)

For Sela, in many relationships, her sexuality becomes understood over time through the process of building a relationship; it is not something she says explicitly:

You get to know that individual and as they talk about their lives, you start to pick up pieces of it; and sometimes when the timing is right, you ask questions if you feel like the person's comfortable with you asking questions. I think the same thing is here - it's not something I feel like I have to tell people right off the bat. I think it's something that becomes understood or becomes known because of them getting to know me and my life; but it's not something that I have to... (Sela 1697 – 1703)

For Brittany, sharing her family and the positive reception she has received in the school community thus far are rewards that outweigh the possibility of any negativity she may experience while providing information about her personal relationship. She believes being open about her sexuality and family demystifies speculations about her life:

Kelly and I have different perspectives on this because she is in the corporate world. And she's in sales and feels like that her competitors could potentially utilize that information against her even though her boss knows we live together. But I try to tell her that I think sometimes her being more secretive about it causes them to be more suspicious about it. And I always telling her that sometimes we give people cause to believe that it's wrong because we're not okay with it ourselves; and so that's been my biggest I guess belief for just being so open. It's

like if I'm okay with it, I think most other people will be okay with it. (Brittany 331 – 338)

For Lily, the decision to position herself as implicitly out meant empowerment; she was now in a position where she could proactively talk about her relationship when it was relevant rather than deflect personal questions during conversation:

Freedom, less contortion and fewer contortions; it can be more my choice about how much I want to engage or put out that's personal versus... What's coming out really puts that issue on me; I can no longer say, "oh I'm not doing it because yada yada yada" whatever I can make up. No it's really on me, on what is my comfort level, how much I want to you know share... I figure I'm 56 years-old, this should not be a decision, this should just be my life. This should just happen because it happens. (Lily 1104 – 1113, 1115 – 1116)

For Brittany, the participant most close to being explicitly out, an unwillingness to share her lesbian identity meant the school community never had an opportunity to explicitly show their support for her relationship and family:

I think a common thread in all of our conversations together has just been around the willingness to put it out there and just say this is who I am. And I shared before that I really think that by not fully sharing who we are that it causes people to question more, it causes it to be more mysterious. And so I think just them knowing has been the critical piece that's helped it to unfold positively. (Brittany 1094 – 1098)

### *Theme Three: Desire for lesbian identity to be a secondary identity*

All of the participants stated the importance of their lesbian identity, and a common theme throughout this research was the desire for their lesbian identity to be secondary to their identities as school administrators and women. They used relationship building and the development of positive reputations as school administrators prior to the disclosure of their sexuality as strategies to facilitate the focus on other identities as primary identities. Sela talks about her lesbian identity in relationship to who she is a person and how people view her:

Who I am is so much more than that piece of it. Now in terms of, but there are some questions in terms of well how do I want to say this, you're always asking yourself... I think there's always the question as to what do people think of me? (Sela 799 – 801)

For Adrian, it was important for her to be identified as something else before being identified as a lesbian by district personnel:

I guess if you have enough conversations with somebody, you figure out if they're going to be alright with it. It's always been really big for me that I be identified as something else before I'm identified as being gay... I've just always wanted to be a friend before I was the gay friend or a colleague before I was the gay colleague. Just so that when it was known, it just didn't matter; it was just another piece of the puzzle, it wasn't the title of... (Adrian 313 – 315, 317 – 319)

Even Brittany, the participant most open and comfortable with referencing her sexuality with district personnel and families, did not want her lesbian identity to be her first identifier:

It's hard for me to know any different - it is part of who I am. I guess I try to, when I meet people, I hope that's not my first criteria of being identified as like oh the lesbian (laugh). I'm not saying it's a bad thing, I'm very proud of who I am and my family and just where I am in life; but I just hope that that's not my... How it's like people first language, so I hope it's not like my daughter who has Autism, the Autistic child - I don't want to that to be not that either of those things are negative, it's just a part of who you are but I don't want to be my first identifier... I just really don't want people to think by saying that I don't want it to be interpreted as negative but I'm more than lesbian. That is one of my identities and I'm very proud of it; but I just don't want it to be the only thing. Because I think for those people who are maybe more closed minded or feel very different about the lifestyle, if that's my only identifier then I never get a professional relationship with them beyond that. And I haven't had that happen to an awareness that I know about - it could have before with people. (Brittany 598 – 605, 612 - 619)

Participants did not want their lesbian identity to be a primary identity in the school community; there was also some conversation about the compatibility of their lesbian and school administrator identities. Adrian shared her thoughts on this and on her

desire to limit the others attributing her performance as a school administrator to any of her identities:

I still don't know. I identify myself as lesbian. I identify myself as a school administrator. But I don't ever put the two in a sentence together because I've just never. I guess I'm still not comfortable even with them even being in a sentence together; they seem to be totally different facets of my life... Any label you are, you are that all the time; but when I'm here, I guess I don't really ascribe what I do to my gender, to my sexuality, I ascribe it to my job... I guess when I'm here doing a job, I try doing the job absent of the fact I'm a woman, absent of the fact I'm a lesbian, absent of the fact that I'm, I don't even know what, a former college athlete. (Adrian 808 – 811, 813 – 814, 816 – 818)

For Alex, it was important to be known in her school community as an administrator not as the token lesbian administrator:

You know I don't want to be a lesbian administrator - I want to be an administrator. I want to be a principal - I don't want to be a lesbian principal. I don't want to not be that either because that's who I am; but it's not who I define myself as an administrator. It's who I am as a person, so that affects me as an administrator; but I just want to be an administrator, a principal. (Alex 894 – 898)

For participants, the negative connotations associated with being a lesbian in our society influenced their readiness to embrace their lesbian identity as their primary identities.

Because of this, it was important for the participants to identify in the school community as something other than lesbian first including school administrator, woman, and mother.

Although some of these identities carried targeted status, they were preferable to the identity of lesbian for participants.

#### *Theme four: Consideration or presence of life changing experiences*

The consideration or presence of a life changing experience such as the adoption or birth of a child, a civil union or marriage, or a life-threatening illness had significant implications for participants and their positioning on the out continuum with district personnel. For some participants, these events precipitated a need to disclose details of

their personal relationships and families. When Alex was diagnosed with breast cancer in her first year as a building principal, the community's desire to support her, their principal who presented as a single female living alone although she was cohabitating with her partner, Annette, forced the disclosure of her sexuality more hastily than she originally planned:

The end of the year, again [my breast cancer] pushed it a little bit, although it would have happened. My plan was to [do] this anyway but it was pushed [by] my breast cancer. So the community was incredibly supportive and they wanted to be able to help. Well in many people's minds, I was a single female living alone: Do you need anyone there to take you to chemo? Do you need someone to be there afterwards? Well I had a partner who was going to be taking me to chemo, who was going to be there. So first I had to tell the superintendent because I had to tell him I had breast cancer. And then I was planning to tell him that summer anyway so that just moved it up a little bit. (Alex 106 – 115)

During her second year as a teacher, Brittany and her partner planned their civil union. While Brittany had included references to her relationship in conversations and her partner, Kelly, participated in both school events and work-related social functions, the ring and their civil union confirmed for her school community exactly who Kelly was to Brittany. Brittany described how her principal made it official:

And I had an amazing principal who, we did this [the staff newsletter], and he actually said, that was when that whole civil union conversation was coming up. This was like nine years ago, so there was all this talk about civil unions and the gay marriage an all that it's just like there. It happened at a time period when that was at the front of the news; and so anyway in the [staff newsletter] he put "Congratulations to Kelly and Brittany who are going to be embarking on this civil union." (Brittany 191 – 197)

Brittany lived openly prior to the announcement of her civil union; after the announcement, she lived openly, sharing her family and her life with district personnel and families. She maintained this openness into her career as a school administrator.

The participants' need to remain closeted or where they were situated on the out continuum at work directly affected the decisions they made in their personal lives, specifically related to the addition of children to their families. Regardless of the ways their families grew – insemination, adoption, fostering, or a blended family – the addition of children made participants very vulnerable to public outing. This created a tension, a thoughtful decision: present as a partnered lesbian with children or as a single parent.

Kayla, who has an infant daughter, talked about how having her daughter changed the way she thought about living authentically as a lesbian parent at work:

It has completely changed the way I look at everything... Because I don't want her to ever feel uncomfortable to say, "I don't have a mom and a dad - I have two moms." And if I'm uncomfortable in my own skin and in who I am and in what I do, she's going to be uncomfortable saying I have two moms. So she's going to compensate and say, "I just have a mom and she has a partner." And I don't ever want that. (Kayla 1141, 1144 – 1148)

The addition of children to her family affected Lily also. Lily successfully lived closeted in her positions as both a building administrator and assistant superintendent until she and her partner decided to adopt; while they were going through the adoption process with their first son, Lily was named interim superintendent in her district. She shared her experience:

It was the adoption experience that outed me. I got ambushed by a rightwing board member in a closed door, one-on-one session, after which I had to call an attorney and have a conference with the board president over the threats. I got quiet but there was really no secret; and as time grew and then I when I brought our younger son to school in [your district], you gotta fill out the parent paperwork. (Lily 206 – 211)

Brittany and her partner have three children; Brittany was open with her school community including parents about her sexuality prior to the birth of her children but her growing family opened the door for more questions. But for Brittany, the birth of their

children also brought continued positive experiences and support from her colleagues, she described her experience:

I didn't carry... I think actually not carrying put me more out there only because they heard I was having a child. Because then if I had just been carrying the child they would have been like, "How far along are you?" But they're knowing that I'm expecting a child but I'm not carrying the child... Yeah. They would say, "So are you adopting?" And I would say, "Actually, I am. My partner's carrying the children and I eventually will be formally adopting them... They actually threw a shower for [my oldest daughter]; and then it was a huge surprise, invited [my partner] up. And then when, actually she was pregnant with the twins and due in July and I transitioned here for my new job that started July 1<sup>st</sup> - so the last week of school for the twins they had this diaper shower where all throughout the day people brought me diapers. And we had enough diapers for like the first 6 months - so they're very generous. (Brittany 408, 411 – 414, 416 – 418, 420 – 425)

The adoption or birth of a child dramatically change the family dynamics; often times, one partner brings children from a previous relationship into a new relationship. This was Maggie's experience. At the time of the interviews, Maggie and her partner were planning to move in together. Maggie's partner has a child; she talked about how this changed her perspective:

I don't think there will always be a conflict because just the way things are changing for me personally. Next couple of weeks, I gotta tell the HR director this is what it is, which is very... just putting it in writing. And I think with [my girlfriend] basically is raising a kid, so we have a kid, so that changes things. So all the sudden - what do you mean you have a kid? Well I have a kid. So where did you get a kid? Well my partner has a kid... where's your husband? I don't have a husband. I think there's just a natural progression; so I think, yeah that will do it. And I just I think there was a point in my life where I totally identified myself as an administrator - I'm going to be the best god damn school principal they've ever seen. And now it's not, it's number two for me. I mean it's very important, I'm really anal about my work; but it's also in perspective more than it was when I first came to realization of who I was. First then was administrator and professional educator and da da da; and now It's like, no this is who I am as a person, this is who I am as a family member. And I would like to be a really good god damn principal, but if I lost the principal thing okay because I still have that other thing which is way more valuable. (Maggie 1470 – 1480)



Before the child arrived, participants had to consider how bringing children into their families would affect their positioning on the out continuum at work. Prior to her battle with breast cancer, Alex considered the possibility of having children with her partner:

When we got together, she didn't want children and I did. And honestly [we] never quite had that conversation because illness intervened; but I also knew when we first started to date or early on in our relationship, if we wanted to have children it would have to be me because biologically she didn't want to carry them. Then I was faced with, I'm not fully out at school and if I want a kid then I would have to be the one being pregnant - talk about outing yourself to your community. Now granted, do single women do that? Sure, not a whole lot; let's be honest, certainly not in [this city]. So that becomes a point of am I brave enough to do that?... Then if I wanted to have children, either adopt or have to be incredibly outted as a lesbian administrator by having that kid with your partner. I don't know if I was brave enough to do that to be perfectly honest; [it] became a moot point... The one thing about not having children is I think that if I had children in any way shape or form it would bring [my partner] more into the school world because then you talk about your kids and then when you talk about your kids you're more likely to talk about your spouse. (Alex 600 – 608, 620 – 623, 1048 – 1051)

Adrian does not have children but did talk about how the decision to have children with her partner would affect her willingness to be out in her school community and what they would have to consider prior to making that decision:

I think I would be outed. I would hope that if we chose to have a child that I would not ever hide that. I would hope that I would never lie and say I was a single parent. I think I would be out; it would, and we've had that conversation, we would need to wait until I'm comfortable with making it very general knowledge that she and I are together. I think it would change everything... Right now I've chosen to get established in my profession; and I'm going to have a great relationship and that's going simultaneously with building myself as a professional. But yeah, when it comes to having kids, I mean I'm not somebody who would take on too many life changes at once, even though I've taken on quite a few in the near past. We would have that talk that kids might come but we'd have to be really comfortable with a lot of things happening... As I can get some years under my belt and some experience under my belt and some rapport and respect from our community as doing what I do under my belt, I think I'd be comfortable introducing that if that's what we decide to do. (Adrian 958 – 962, 965 – 970, 972 – 974)

For heterosexual couples who are contemplating bringing children into their relationship, they typically consider the financial and time implications; for participants, there was additional deliberation, specifically regarding their readiness to share their sexuality and expose their committed relationships in the school community.

*Theme five: Generational differences*

All of the participants referenced a belief that as time passes sexuality becomes less and less of an issue in our society. Tolerance and acceptance they all agree have increased significantly over the last several years. Lily shared her thoughts on the changes:

I find the world in general to be more, to have a stronger capacity to handle sexual orientation as a norm, issues of sexual orientation... But I also think it's a different world; I think you know people get married in the park now a days, that just wasn't happening 30 years ago. And again, I'm 56 years old. (Lily 1084 – 1085, 1497 – 1499)

Participants referenced the increase of gay and lesbian images in the media. For the older participants, growing up there were very few images of people who identified as gay or lesbian; most of the images available were negative representations. Abby talked about the difference between now and then:

I mean the world is a completely different place, a completely different place. I was trying to think of one positive stereotype that I would have ever have seen on TV, anybody that would have been on TV when I was growing up. I wouldn't have even, I couldn't have even guessed or anyone that would have been considered a positive, popular athlete or TV personality or anything that I could have identified with, can't even can't think. So you know, very different times, different conversations, different policies in school – so I would hope I would be different. (Abby 475 – 482)

Sela shared her experiences with the way queer-identified people were treated when she was growing up and how she perceives an increase in queer images in the media have helped change those stereotypes:

I think the younger generation is much more out. I think that you'll see it in the older generation; but it's not as... I think either really old where they just don't give a crap anymore what anybody thinks; or really young because they've not had that they have not lived their life. Now that generation has never experienced not talking about sexuality in the public - if you look back at how long it's been since Ellen's come out and Melissa Etheridge and Rosie O'Donnell and all of that has been out in the public. There's a generation coming through that had, maybe when they were babies it was not out in public, but since they have known who they are and have been willing to express it, it's been out there and it's been okay. And we've lived a life where it wasn't okay; for years I can remember if there was ever a same sex couple, they were referred to as those people. And I can remember maybe two older same sex couples, one male and one female, and listening to the people talk about them; and it was almost like they were this lepers, that we had to keep it (inaud). And if you found yourself liking them, don't tell anybody about that; and so I think that's where, I think that's why our generation has a little bit of a different picture about it. And sometimes now we're starting to be a little freer about it because it is being more talked about more accepted. (Sela 1349 – 1365)

For younger participants, they have seen gay and lesbian issues on the forefront in the media and represented positively on the screen. Older participants referenced their perception of the growth in acceptance of gays and lesbians in our society; and all have made great strides of their own, specifically over the last few years as a result of both a bolstered self-confidence and by watching their younger colleagues live openly and received positively at work. Abby talked about how she has seen society change as time has passed and how that has changed her thinking about where she positions herself on the out continuum:

I hang around some folks who are younger than me who are like you and probably I'm making an assumption who grew up much more comfortable than I did. I see how comfortable they are and how accepted they are from (snapped finger) being out from the minute they hit the door and it's like wow. I mean that's pretty cool; so [I] think that helps those of us that have been around maybe a while - oh it doesn't have to be so damn hard; but again it's a completely different time. (Abby 486 – 492)

Brittany shared a story about an older gay administrator in her last administrative assignment and how generational differences affected his experiences and how her decision to live openly helped him feel more comfortable living authentically over time:

And at my last school, when I transitioned there, I actually worked with a principal who is gay. But it's interesting because he wasn't really out there; he's one of those, he's out but it's a different generation. He's out more than he was out at the time, more than he thought he was (laugh). And he had been there for a couple of years and wasn't really out... I saw him as being in a different generation. I really think that makes a big difference. I just think I was, I am fortunate to be a part of life right now, to be able to be open about my family and my relationship. And so I think there's a lot to be fearful of earlier on... He came out... I think I was like the lab rat - these people are accepting of you so I'm going to throw it out there. He has been in public education for twenty something years. And we just talked about it a little bit; and finally one day at, we were having some kind of end of the year and he stood up at a staff meeting and said something about, "Next year I'm going to have my, I'm going to have you guys at our house, that would be my partner and myself, at our house for our welcome back party for school and I'm not going to take our pictures down." And he started crying. And it was like the receiving line at the end of the staff meeting of people just hugging him because I think they knew. And they really wanted, they felt that that was a big barrier in their relationship. Because maybe they don't understand how I understand it being a person that's in a similar situation or at least to the level that I can potentially understand it. Because they're going, "Gosh, we just love him for who he is." They felt like it was a sign of him not being as close to them I think. I think they thought it was more about them than about him. (Brittany 278 – 283, 295 – 298, 301, 303 – 317)

During our conversations, it was evident that younger participants understand that if they were living at a different time, they may not be living as openly. Alex shared a story about an acquaintance who is an older gay administrator:

I think every piece of data says that it is; I just think, I mean every bit of survey says that kids under thirty, adults under thirty, that gay marriage is not even an issue; it's just not an issue. I look at what I can do now versus what people could do 15 years ago before me. There was a gentleman who retired; he was a high school principal for I think over 20 years and went to central office for just a couple of years. It was one of those things that he never talked about it; you talked to people who knew him really well, he never talked about it. I'm quite certain he's gay; and I'm quite certain he has a life with someone but it was not brought into the school at all. The people that he worked with closely, it was never part of

their world. And I just I feel sad now for him. He might have thought how much greater his life was then if he had been born in the 30s. (Alex 1061 – 1071)

Brittany reflected on the effects of growing up in a more accepting generation has impacted older gay and lesbian administrators and how being born in a different generation may have influenced her decision to position herself as implicitly and sometimes explicitly out:

I think there's some people who are older than us who say, "I wish I could do that." Or "I wish I wouldn't have had to wait this long to be able to do that and celebrate who I am." I think there are people who are on that continuum going, "Not in a million years it doesn't matter if I'm the only lesbian left in the whole school I'm not putting it out there because that one person who disagrees with it could use that against me." I think there's just a lot, an immense amount of fear about it still for some people. So I just think it's a continuum; and I think some people probably don't agree with me - they have a problem with it because it is more private and it's a continuum... Because we have talked about just within this generation, I feel like that is because the truth of the matter is if I would have happened to be in a different generation, I might not be living exactly as I'm living today. So I think I'm more frustrated with people around them who have caused them to think that they can't live out; and I'm more hurt for those people who have to carry that with them of not being able to be themselves. (Brittany 649 – 657, 1110 – 1115)

All seven participants who were cautious about disclosing their sexuality at work said guardedness is more a result of their internalized feelings than it is the opinions or reactions of others. Alex talked specifically about societal change; while she's confident about the growing tolerance, one can never be certain that it is not an issue:

You look at all the studies and the younger generation, it's not an issue. The younger generation is not in charge and is not going to be in charge for a while... It's a journey. I don't know if it's a phrase you get a lot; but it's a journey. And in some ways, especially in society now, it's a lot more about me and you about you, than it is about them, because more often than not, they don't really care; at least not in the community that I work. But until I can be fully certain of that all the time, it matters. (Alex 161 – 163, 462 – 467)

*Theme six: The perception of informal support*

Participants' perception of the informal support available to them directly influenced the way they positioned themselves on the out continuum as lesbian administrators in their school communities. All participants referenced experiences where these supports were available and times when these supports disappeared. For the purposes of this research, informal supports included: 1) a district climate that was open and accepting of diversity; 2) the sensitivity of the board and the community to issues of sexuality; 3) the protection or lack of protection from the superintendent and supervisors; 4) the presence of queer-identified colleagues both in the district and outside the district; and 5) the presence of straight allies. The effects of formal protections for participants will be explored later in this chapter.

#### *District climate*

All participants were more likely to be implicitly or explicitly out in districts where the climate was described as open to issues of diversity. The belief that their districts supported and embraced diversity was reinforced by written policies honoring diversity and also by personal experiences throughout the years with issues that required district personnel to use a lens of social justice. The participants' perceptions of an accepting district climate were directly related to the actions of members of the school community. Both Abby and Brittany shared their experiences with district personnel with regard to support and acceptance. When asked about her experience in her district, Abby shared:

I'm in [this district] which is such an open, welcoming place. I would guess that my experience somewhere else, even as a school administrator, could be very different. So it's probably more me, less about being the administrator and more about ending up in a place. What that piece means to me is that there are places that are really welcoming and inviting. And I think one of the things I've learned along the way in my evolution is when I was less out, more protected, more

worried or fearful, what I learned is if I would have been willing to give other people the benefit of the doubt, I would have learned most people are that way. Because when I went through the hard time and I needed a lot of support, everyone was there a hundred percent. And a lot of those people would have been people I would have been fearful of knowing about me before. Of course they knew about me anyway, but when I needed help they were there. (Abby 903 – 915)

Similarly, Brittany shared how the support she received from her colleagues as she was coming out directly influenced her willingness to continue sharing information about her partner and children:

Probably the biggest support in all of that is just the reception I've gotten from just being able to be myself. Probably if I had had negative experiences, I would have to think that I wouldn't be as open when I came here. Or because I have transitioned from different schools within the district, I always had the opportunity to be less open at the next school because they don't know any different. Yes, they might know that I have a non-traditional relationship and I have children; but my day to day interactions could really be significantly different and how much I talk or don't talk about my family. So I think it's really been the people around me that have been the biggest support and continue to be. (Brittany 829 – 837)

During our conversations, Adrian also referenced a supportive district culture that she believed would protect her from the possibility of negativity from a parent or a false accusation:

That's coming; I mean I'm going to have a parent say something at some point. I'm going to have kids say something at some point. I'm fortunate enough to work in a district where I absolutely know I'll be protected or supported or all claims would be... I have established myself where any claim would be unfounded and they would know that. (Adrian 351 – 355)

### *Board and Community*

The participants' perception of the support they both currently receive and could expect to receive from the board of education and the community in their districts directly affected their decisions to live implicitly out as lesbian administrators in their school community. During our conversation, I asked Alex what it meant to her to be a school

administrator that identifies as lesbian; she reflected about how her community supported her as a lesbian building principal:

What does it mean? It means that this community is comfortable enough to hire me. Even if I'm not out, as [my partner] would say, it's probably the worst kept secret in [the community]. So it's, I guess what it means to me is the fact that it's not an issue that unlike from what I've heard from other people, I don't get veiled comments. I don't get veiled commentary at school board meetings; you don't hear people talking about the leadership, that we need good family values or that they're teaching the kids inappropriate, that they're setting a bad example, we need better role models, things that only if you listen for them do you hear. So I don't get any of that and honestly for the most part, it's pretty, I'm not going to say it's a nonissue because I don't think societally speaking it's a nonissue yet; but I have never heard even the inkling of bubbling that it's an issue. And so I think it's great that in this community, that I can be actually as openly out as I am and not worry about it really. I think that's great for our kids. I know that it has been incredibly powerful for some of my gay and lesbian staff members; the fact that they have a gay principal has meant the world to them and I have gotten that in bits and pieces. It really has just made them proud and happy. (Alex 1054 – 1069)

Alex's support was indirect; the board and community accepted her by not making her sexuality an issue in the district. Brittany shared an experience where her relationship with Kelly was celebrated by the community when they treated her union as they would have treated any other married administrator in the district:

They have an annual [district-wide fundraising dinner] which is like all of the people in the community who come and pay - it's like an evening on the town. And this year when the envelope came it said, Brittany and [Kelly] on the envelope. So before it always just said my name; so whoever did the envelopes this year... And [Kelly] would be like, "I don't know if I should go." I would not go to her work function because she doesn't have that level of relationship kind of outness. But I was in reflecting though about that and for her that was a really big deal to have her name on the envelope - that this is coming from someone who is addressing these envelopes, who is not an employee of the district had enough awareness. And so what I did was back tracked to figure out who did the envelopes to call those people and leave them a personal message about their level of thoughtfulness and inclusiveness. I mean for to see her, there was no question then she was going for sure this year. I mean like she felt like, "Wow they want me to be there." So it was really powerful. She called me and said, "My name's on the envelope." And it's not that she hadn't been welcome before but that kind of raised the bar for her to feel more welcome. (Brittany 802 – 817)



While Alex and Brittany shared stories of how both direct and indirect support from the community affected them, both Kayla and Lily shared different ideas of the support they believed they would receive in their districts from the community and the board of education. When I asked Kayla about community support, she shared the experience of her former principal who identified as lesbian and why she felt she would not be supported if faced with an issue in the district that was derived from her sexual orientation. She explained her thoughts on her perception of the community's beliefs:

The white Republicans with a lot of money... We laugh because as administrators we say, "They're white republicans posed as democrats." And they do they have a lot of money and they have old money. They've been in [the community] a long time... Some of them are older African Americans. We have the two extremes - we have the older white generation and the older African American generations, neither generation actually believes that it's okay to be gay. It's not anything, it's something that you choose - it's something that you can fix if you want to, you don't have to be different like that. (Kayla 1009 – 1012, 1014 – 1019)

Lily had a similar feeling about the potential for support from the community and board of education in her school district. Interestingly, Lily is an assistant superintendent in a district where other participants in this study are employed; those participants share a different view of the potential support they would receive but she is not convinced that support is available. I asked Lily if the other lesbian administrators in her district operate under a false sense of security:

I'm going to answer that two ways. I think that is a very significant question and I'm going to answer that in two ways. My first way is that I don't want to think that because I want, I do see the shift and I do think it is different. My other answer is absolutely, yes I think that; but what I cannot discern is how much of that is the projection based on my own experience and the post traumatic stress that I carry and how much of that is haven't had enough evidence or proof that it's a different world. Because I am utterly intrigued when people say, "Oh it's a great and wonderful place" because... It's a crazy thing to be celebrating the former boss in this regard because I think I wouldn't want you to write this and have it attributed to me because if everybody else reads it, I don't want to scare them; but we certainly have members of our board, who if they got pressured,

they absolutely would cave, not a one of us would have an advocate or an ally. Luckily, they're powerless as an individual member; and I think with our new boss, I'm not the least bit threatened or concerned about that. But boy, you know, because I see the kinds of stuff that they bring to us sometimes which is all about social networking and all about ins and outs and all about somebody's single opinion. (Lily 1577 – 1592)

### *Superintendent or supervisors*

For many participants, the only direct conversations they had about their sexuality were with their superintendents and supervisors. These conversations required amazing courage, and participants believed they were necessary for two main reasons. One, participants did not want their supervisors to be surprised if their sexual orientation was brought to their attention by a member of the community or other district personnel. Participants also wanted to gauge the potential support they would receive from supervisors if an allegation about their sexuality was made by a member of the community. Alex revealed her thoughts about the decision to disclose her sexual orientation to her superintendent:

I knew that I needed to tell my superintendent because the other part was that this is a very small community and I knew people would triangulate. Because I only live a mile and half away, it's one thing to see me out to dinner, because people go out to dinner with their friends female and otherwise, but then if they see me at the grocery store or out to dinner again, people will triangulate. And people aren't dumb; and so eventually I wanted to tell my boss because I needed to - I didn't want him to be surprised. I'm not so foolish to believe that I am fooling anyone. (Alex 93 – 100)

Alex told her superintendent at the end of her first year in her current position and shared an experience she had during that summer with him and another cabinet member and how that affected her:

...The district has never been anything but incredibly supportive. The summer I went to a wedding, I think it was that same year I came out to my boss, the superintendent, in May. I was at a wedding that he was at in June, he'd never met [my partner]. He came over to introduce himself to her - that same wedding we

were upstairs and we were at the bar waiting for the reception to open we're walking downstairs with the assistant superintendent and her husband. And the assistant superintendent says to my partner, "Now, I know that [your partner] has told me but what is it that you do again?" I had never talked about [my partner] to her in my life; but it was incredibly gracious. (Alex 910 – 919)

In her previous district, Sela found similar support and shared one of the most profound demonstrations of support from her building principal:

[In my last position], I think that the defining moment for me was when we were all sitting in an administrative meeting; and we have this education foundation dinner dance that we all have to go to... That was there; and we had to go. It was the superintendent said everybody needs to be there. So we're going around the table getting tickets and the principal says, "[So and so] are you going to bring your wife? So and so are you going to bring your wife? [Sela] are you going to bring [Sandra]?"...It made me feel really good that hey and I said, "No she doesn't want to come to something stupid like this (both laughing)." Which what everybody else was pretty much saying too; but it made me feel like hey you know what it's okay. (Sela 399 – 402, 404 – 407, 409 – 411)

Support from the participants' direct supervisors was essential to the decisions they made regarding positioning on the out continuum with district personnel; but as Maggie and other participants pointed out in their interviews, that can change quickly when superintendents and supervisors leave unexpectedly. Maggie shared her experience in her previous district:

I had a conversation with [a lesbian administrator in another district], "Do I out myself to my superintendent?" Well it depends on your superintendent – [first superintendent's] cool with me, [next superintendent] wanted to hang me on a cross and burn me. There go but the grace of God - your boss can... He unleashed it all... [My first superintendent] would have not let those people behave that way. The [next superintendent] I think put them up to part of it; and I'm not the only person who thinks that, there's a lot of people that think [he's] is behind a lot of that. It wasn't coincidental that every Saturday morning he was having coffee with one of the guys that's a chief hater. (Maggie 1072 – 1076, 1078 – 1082)

Maggie shared one of the negative encounters she experienced following a change from a supportive superintendent to a superintendent she described as unsupportive:

I think really the turning point came, I had one superintendent for two years and I had [my first superintendent] for like 5 or 6 years, and then came [another superintendent]. And he, as superintendent what they tell you, you listened to the crazy once, you see everybody one time and then you realize she's crazy and you never ask her back, you just you cut her off. He didn't know that rule about cutting them off. And he basically just spent too much time in the hating crazies and unleashed it; and nobody stopped it. And it got the point where it wasn't just them screaming about gays, though that was a common hobby, they just would scream out in board meetings. I mean it was very much a kin to what you used to see in the city schools -where people just felt like they could scream out at any point and you're like so they lost control. But it, really in my mind, the pivotal moment was [the superintendent before the current superintendent] and when you let, when you actually issue a district report... The district actually issued a report at one point which I used to carry with me every day; but now it sits on my desk at home. And it was like district sanctioned; and in there, it talked about the school afraid of becoming a gay high school. And I'm like okay, just use any other word in there. Would you ever say you're afraid of becoming a black high school? Which they were afraid of but they would never say that or put that in writing that they would never be afraid of being known as a Jewish high school. But they put in writing and this board member went just fucking ape shit. (Maggie 489 – 501, 283 - 290)

Sela did not wait for an experience like Maggie's; the perception of a lack of support from a new supervisor in her previous school district resulted in Sela's decision to not pursue a principal position and eventually leave the district:

One of the reasons I left [my last district] was there was going to be change over in principals; and I had a conversation with the new superintendent about possibly being the principal. I wanted to make sure that he was comfortable with my sexuality and would therefore be supportive because [my previous district] is a very conservative district. And there had been some incidents of board members charging into people's classrooms and accusing them of starting the Gay-Straight Alliance and incidents of staff members accusing others of being lesbians or having issues like that. So I wanted to be very comfortable that he would support me if that were to arise with me as a principal; and I didn't feel that comfort. (Sela 201 – 210)

### *Queer colleagues*

All of the participants referenced the importance of gay and lesbian colleagues both within and outside of the district in their process of negotiating the out continuum at work. Participants specifically referred to the presence of lesbian administrators in

cabinet positions in their districts and others they considered role models or trailblazers as important to their confidence. At one time or another, every participant turned to gay and lesbian educators outside of their districts for support, advice and even encouragement to apply for other positions. In some scenarios, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the advice they received from their queer colleagues reinforced negative internal messages; but at other times, the encouragement they received from their gay and lesbian colleagues provided the support needed to move further on the out continuum or to make the switch from an unsupportive district to a position in a more accommodating setting. During our conversations, I asked each participant about what supported their development of a positive lesbian identity as a school administrator; in response, Lily shared,

I have known some absolutely fabulous lesbian administrators. What I enjoyed was the safety of conversation with them; but it wasn't about being lesbian. It was about just the shared journey; it was just nice to share it with lesbians. That begs the question about whether I have a positive lesbian identity. I would say I'm on the positive side of the spectrum; but I think I support it. I think I've had to get there the hard way; and I've had a lot of friends... Now I was one of the first to be an administrator; there have been a lot of lesbians that came after me but most of them are teachers. I had a circle of lesbian education friends that eventually one became a superintendent. It was all about being a strong woman in that era. (Lily 1067 – 1075)

For Lily, she found reassurance from other lesbian educators outside her school district; for other participants, they found support from queer-identified administrators within their school communities. Adrian, Abby and Brittany all shared positive feelings about having a network of gay and lesbian administrators within their districts. Adrian explained the importance for her of networking with others who share that common experience:

I'm fortunate that we have a lot of other gay and lesbian administrators in our district. So I think in some ways, it's almost been a positive thing. I think some of us have developed a camaraderie just because we're gay, not necessarily because we have ton in common. It's kind of this, we better stick together sort of thing; when another one gets hired we all celebrate. (Adrian 445 – 449)

Abby works in a district where there are high numbers of gay and lesbian administrators; she reflected on how those shared experiences affected her and how the district's trend in hiring more gay and lesbian administrators comforts her:

I think probably the one thing that I'm conscious about is that many of us have some common experiences, that if things arise we could always support each other. The other thing is that I know that the general population is aware of a substantial number of us are either gay or lesbian; so the message is, we're not going to discriminate against people no matter who they are. And there's some of us sitting in the room that would fall under those categories; but it doesn't matter what category you're in. The district walks the walk. (Abby 441 – 448)

Brittany described an exchange with another lesbian-identified administrator in her school district and how that experience reinforced how different others' journeys could be from hers and how lucky she was to have been embraced by district personnel and families in her school community:

I even remember actually [an older assistant superintendent in the district that identifies as lesbian], this was years ago so I barely even knew her, saying "This is unbelievable." This was right after I had, and I didn't really get that it was unbelievable at that time I didn't even get that it was unbelievable at the time because it was just my life. I don't think if I actually realized how it could have actually taken a different road, I might not have been so... But I think I just didn't even think about that. So one day I happened to be at central office and she's just like, "Hey I heard that [your school] threw a shower for you and Kelly to celebrate your civil union - that's unbelievable." And I still remember that day I was kind of like, "Yeah, They're really nice people." I didn't say that out loud, I was like, "Yeah, I know I am so fortunate." I got that I was fortunate; but I don't think I really got it - now I really get it... [I] realize that hearing other people's stories it can be really different; and seeing other people struggle that it can be really different. (Brittany 448 – 458, 460 – 661)

For participants it was not just important to them to see other queer-identified administrators in their school community. Many specifically referenced the presence of

people they identified as queer role models who had experienced success in the district prior to their arrival or during their time. For many, the lesbian administrators participants admired were unsuspecting, unaware that they were impacting others' journeys positively. During our conversations, I asked Abby what supported her development of a positive identity as a lesbian school administrator; she replied,

...knowing there were other folks around who have also been successful, who had also been treated fairly. I think [the lesbian administrator that has been here the longest] was more gradually out as time went on; so I think that was probably huge. (Abby 743 – 745)

Lily, who was referenced as a positive lesbian role model by many of the participants, shared a story about when she was approached by a gay administrator in her district and how her decision to position herself as implicitly out at work affected his comfort level:

I'll tell you what though, we had a person leave us in July for a position in another district; and he's gay and he made a special point to come over and say to me, "I really want to thank you for being who you are." I had no idea what he really meant except I knew that he was saying for being lesbian and being out and being "a role model" or whatever that piece was; because he also mentioned another gay administrator and he said, "and I'm going to tell him thanks too." He's young this guy's young and I think he saw that maybe his sexuality wasn't going to limit him. That isn't something that I'm really conscious of; but I was really taken with that. (Lily 1434 – 1443)

For some, the visibility of lesbian-identified administrators at the cabinet level provided reassurance for them. Brittany shared her thoughts on how this representation affected her journey and indirectly supported her by silencing potential negativity with the absence of a sympathetic audience at the district level:

I haven't had negative interactions from the community that I'm aware of that has been confrontational; but then I just really reflected on that and it's like who are they going to go to? There are people in the district that are in positions of power. politically there are residents that are in positions of power that I think other people might not agree with it; but they're not as outward about it because it's like who do you go to? Who do you take those things to? And it could impact their relationship with people in positions of power. (Brittany 680 – 686)

Lily has had a seat on the cabinet in her district for twenty years. During our conversations, I asked her how she explained the difference in experiences for of the other queer administrators in her school district:

One, I've been there longer. Two, what I'm happy to know about that is that this is really, this is going to sound terrible, but what I hope is that I've protected them from it... I was the target and people got to practice taking their shots at me. The last shot that I know of, and it involves one of the people you're talking to but I don't know that that person knows it, was there was a parent comment made in an interview process and the parent comment was, "we don't hire any more women coaches." And it was code language for lesbian; and there wasn't anybody that was fooled by that statement. This is the one thing that is the contradiction to the former boss; he was never susceptible to that kind of thinking because he was all about performance... I don't know if I've absorbed it; but I think my presence in the meetings where that would be a discussion allowed it never to get trashy, it wasn't about me. (Lily 1530 – 1532, 1534 – 1541, 1551 – 1552)

The presence and support of other gay and lesbian administrators in the participants' school communities and even in other districts directly affected their comfort in living implicitly and sometimes explicitly out. In places where other queer-identified administrators were successful, participants used these experiences as models for their own progression and advancement.

### *Straight Allies*

Consistently throughout all of the interviews, participants reflected on the importance of straight allies. For participants, straight allies were found within their districts, in other districts, and in professional organizations. Straight allies provided support for participants when they revealed their sexuality to others in the school community for the first time. During one of our conversations, Lily shared the story of the one and only time she had an explicit conversation with anyone in her school community about her sexual orientation:



But I will never forget the first professional conversation I was in when I outed myself; and luckily it was with another lesbian at the time and it was a pretty intimate setting. There was about eight of us who happened to be in England presenting at a conference; and we'd gone to a play that introduced the conversation. So then we are staying up all night having this conversation because what else are you going to do when you are hanging out in England with a bunch of colleagues. And I woke up the next morning with a huge emotional hangover and terror over what have I, and this was after I was in [this district] as assistant superintendant, over what had I done. And the one thing that I was able to receive in that conversation was that there was absolutely nobody sitting in that room that didn't already know that I was a lesbian and that this other woman was a lesbian; and they had been dying to express their acceptance, their concern, their allyship and to be able to engage in a open conversation. And while both of us were willing and scared and think of the time as right only because we were both there, we talked about it later over about how that never would have happened if either of us had been by ourselves. And how important it was to discover that there weren't really as many hostile people out there anymore; but I didn't know because I wasn't looking for the opportunity. (Lily 377 – 394)

For Sela, the support she received from straight allies contributed to the development of her positive lesbian identity as a school administrator:

My networking with other administrators. I'll start with that - I think that's where you get a lot of support and then I think also support from straight allies... I think the compliments and kudos and the relationships that you build; and people talk about the difference that you've made. That's a huge, that not only builds your identity as a gay administrator but just as an administrator in general. So that you do a good job; and it doesn't matter who you are, that you're doing a good job and people are recognizing it. (Sela 1137 – 1138, 1143 – 1147)

Kayla has found similar support in a professional organization:

I have been fortunate enough to get involved with the [the local association for secondary principals]; I am currently the president of the organization for this next year. Nobody sees me any different. I used to I lived in this world for the first few years that I was on the board that nobody knew who I was, they didn't know anything about my personal life and blah blah blah. And we were having breakfast one morning at a meeting and we talked about a couple of other things and then all of the sudden somebody, one of my friends, [another administrator] who's out in [another school district], leaned over and said something about "What does your partner do?" She was like, "Oh come on, we all know (laugh)." I was like, it's not a secret? It's not and I guess, yeah I guess I need to quit living like it is; but I don't know, I mean I'm going to always do that and be guarded. (Kayla 732 – 742)

Kayla shared another story about the comfort of knowing that she can rely on the administrators in this organization to support her both personally and professionally. She found support in the way that they treated her the way they would any other member. They were available to answer questions and give advice when she was questioning her desire to remain in education after watching her principal lose her job for reasons that affected her personally.

*Theme seven: Formal protections*

Currently, sexual orientation is not a protected status in the anti-discrimination policies at the federal or state level; some local cities and municipalities include protections for people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in local laws. At the time of this research, sexual orientation was included in the anti-discrimination policies of 4 of the 25 districts in the metropolitan area where participants were employed. During our conversations, participants were asked if sexual orientation was in their anti-discrimination policies and the meaning these protections held for them. Most participants were aware of the inclusion or exclusion of sexual orientation in their board policies, and all participants believed the protections were a nice gesture by the district. The responses varied regarding the meaning this protection held for each participant. Maggie talked about the protections in her current district and the lack of protection in her previous district:

Here in [the city school district], I'm actually a protected body. I had very clear discrimination against me in [my last district]; but there are no laws to prohibit it... In the city, there are such policies. There [are] laws... And in [the] county there's not. The [state] there's not. The federal government there's not. (Maggie 182 – 185, 187, 189 – 190)

For participants where protections for sexual orientation were not included in district's board policy, each were asked why they thought this protection was not included. In Abby's opinion, sexual orientation is not included as a protected status in their board policy because the district is not required to list it:

Now the little tidbits I've heard [are] that it's not required so they don't want to do it. Whatever the thinking is behind that, I wasn't around at that point in time. I would be anxious to hear why they wouldn't, why the board would say that they wouldn't. I don't know what their thinking was then. [The lawyer's] job is to offer advice, I can see maybe his argument would be, and I'm not saying I would support it, if we put that category in then are we required to put other categories in that aren't required by law? Why would we put that one in? Who only knows what the other one might be; I could see that that would have been his argument before. And I could argue exactly what you said, I mean why wouldn't we? This is what we live and we breathe, so why wouldn't we? I haven't had those conversations to even know. (Abby 781 – 792)

During her time as a teacher and now as an administrator in her district, Adrian has witnessed firsthand the board's decision to continue to exclude sexual orientation from their board policy on anti-discrimination; she speculated on the board's reason for their decision and why the issue has not been pursued more forcefully by lesbian administrators at the central office level:

Yeah, I wish it was included. It's come up several times; we've had a lot of kids that have been really active who have brought it to the board on multiple occasions on multiple years. It hasn't come up in a few years, their stance has always been that it's implied. It's implied in some of the other terminology... There's a piece of me that wonders, if is it not in here because some of our top officials in our district that are gay have they not pushed it because they don't want it to look like they're trying to drive a personal initiative and not a community initiative. Like our gay superintendents, have they? I wonder if part of the reason they have not pushed that agenda. There are double standards. A white man pushing almost any initiative isn't doing it because he's a white man but a black man pushing a black initiative is doing it because he's black and a gay woman pushing a gay initiative is doing it because she's gay. And we live in a world of double standards and there's a piece of me that wonders if that double standard is not why that agenda hasn't been pushed. (722 – 725, 727 – 736)

Brittany also said that sexual orientation is not included in their board policy addressing anti-discrimination. She reflected on her feelings about not having the formal protection and why she believes it has not been included:

I don't know what the Board's hang up is on that; I know it comes back to the board pretty much on an annual basis. And I'd have to say that that's disappointing to me. Maybe someone or a couple of people on there who just aren't quite there yet - I don't really know. But it hasn't impacted me that much. I thought about it and I'm disappointed by it; but it hasn't impacted me significantly because whether they include it or not, I feel safe. In our strategic plan, all staff members, students will feel valued, will feel safe, will feel... They'll work in an environment that is free of hate, that's tolerant, that's... So I think even though it's not written in that formal anti-discrimination policy, I don't feel like I'm impacted by that in my day to day. It's not like I've had an incident taken it to them and they've said, "Well sorry, we're not..." It does baffle me that they haven't made that decision given just the people who work in the district; and I just don't know what keeps it from, keeps them from really turning the corner on it. Maybe if I felt like I wasn't supported it would be a bigger deal to me. (Brittany 971 – 985)

In her previous district, Sela represented the administrators on a committee that proposed adding sexual orientation to the district's anti-discrimination policy. She shared her experience where she was disappointed by both the district and an administrative colleague:

The other part of it is being involved in policies, decision making and listening to the as the politics. Because this goes back to that experience I had before where there was a group of us got together and we discussed how our particular district did not have any protection in terms of sexual orientation. This was a previous district; well actually, this district doesn't have it either. And so we talked about because I felt empowered at that point in time by the superintendent to address issues like that - we talked about how we could proceed to address that. The real sticky part was I'm an administrator the rest of them are teachers. As an administrator, I sit on the administrative piece of that where the negotiating piece of it. We decided that this particular NEA would be the best place to start with and they were very open to it, wonderful about it. The gentleman who brought it to what we call our pro studies team, our negotiating team did an awesome job because he's a debate coach. So he covered all; but the hard part for me was sitting in on the, when it went to our caucus as administrators and hearing my own my fellow administrators talk about "Well we don't have any interest in this right now so we're just going to delay it until they forget about it." And some of the

administrators looking over at me because - we had had some social justice training so there had been some conversations - looking over at me and kind of knowing that what that meant to me, how that hurt me. Some of them were clueless others were not. But I think even more so, where that bothered me was because that same administrator, when we were in our social justice groups we were talking about abolishing the n word and his comment about abolishing the n word and talking to people about not using the n word was "Well because if you keep silent about it that means that you're really okay with using the n word." And I looked at him and my thought was "So it's okay to keep silent about sexual orientation because you're okay with discrimination against sexual orientation." This was our HR assistant superintendent. And so I got up and walked out of the meeting; and there were a couple of people who followed me out of the meeting and stood out there and talked to me in support. But I think that's, those are the kinds of things that makes it very difficult with that politic piece of it because you have to be, you have to walk kind of a thin line... They stalled it and then they just said that until the state changes their protected categories, they're not going to change their protected categories... I think that was the easy decision to make. They didn't have to really put their personal beliefs into it - they didn't have to come up with their reasoning behind it. It was the safe decision to say "Well the state doesn't recognize it as a protected group - so we're not going to recognize it. Our legal team has told us we're not going to recognize it as a protected group. (Sela 818 – 848, 850 – 852, 854 - 858)

Sela had the courage to work on this district committee attempting to persuade the district to add sexual orientation to their anti-discrimination policy because of the informal support she received from her supervisor and other staff in her school, but she was quickly reminded that not everyone in the district supported issues of sexual orientation in her district.

All of the participants were asked what the formal protection would mean for them, how it would affect their practices as lesbian administrators; their responses varied. When asked how if the formal protection would make a difference to her, Adrian responded,

Yeah, I think it would send a message that that our school board understands that 10% of the population needs to be protected. Yeah, I think it would be nice. Do I think I would be protected regardless, yeah. I feel that's kind of the interesting, kind of conundrum of our district; because I think that they'd have anybody's back in our district if they were... And I don't think they do discriminate,

obviously they don't discriminate because of sexual orientation. I mean my God we're all getting hired; but yeah, it would be a nice sentiment to have it in there. (Adrian 738 – 745)

It was remarkable that in a district where several of the administrators identify as gay or lesbian like Adrian's, there were no formal protections for them in the board policy.

Abby's response when asked about formal protections in her school district was similar to Adrian's:

Would I like it to? Absolutely. I think what probably makes it a little less important to me is that I know everyone is treated fairly anyway. I also think five years from now I might be willing to fight battles differently than I am in my first 12 months... I absolutely think it's a nice gesture. I would say in our current climate, it doesn't matter given the board, given the administrators, given the superintendent. I think what it would do is protect against any tendency to move to be less fair and less inclusive; but everything we're doing in our actions are moving us the other way. I think eventually it will get in. I think right now, in the first year of a new superintendent, is he going to do that his first year that he comes in? I doubt that he going to advocate for it and push it with the board; he would do his homework and find out that it had come up before... (Abby 743 – 748, 771 – 778)

Unlike Adrian and Abby who felt the presence of informal support in their districts, Maggie's experience in her previous school district contributed to her passionate feelings about the need for formal protections. When asked if she felt she was discriminated against in her previous district because of her sexual orientation and how formal protections would have helped, she shared:

Oh god yeah, it was clear discrimination; but there's no rules against it. Yeah, oh god yeah. If you had put in pregnant woman, black, Jewish, any of the protected classes, oh god yeah I would be on an island right now as both sides knew; but no, so yeah protection, oh god yeah it matters. Would it be ugly still? Could they still do it? Yeah. Do people still willfully discriminate against black people? Sure they do; but there are some laws to make them at least be a little bit smarter, to make them go, "What you can't stand up in a meeting and say we're not going to have a black administrator running this school?" And I think it gives the bosses an out too - it's hard to stand up and go, "You know what, I'm going to stand up for gay people... And it gives the bosses an out - you can't do that that's unconstitutional. And so all the sudden, they have a little bit more spine because the law has given

them spine where otherwise they're, "What are you a gay lover? Is that what you are?" So sure it helps everybody I think do the right thing. (Maggie 1579 – 1589, 1594 – 1597)

For Maggie, formal protections provide security not only for gay and lesbian educators, they provide support for superintendents and supervisors who want to protect queer-identified administrators from discrimination but there are currently no federal or state mandates requiring those protections.

### Summary of Findings

All participants currently positioned themselves as implicitly out on the out continuum with district personnel. Younger participants and participants who identified as lesbian after the age of thirty moved more quickly to implicitly or explicitly out with district personnel than participants who were forty-five or older and identified as lesbian by college. All of the participants' progressions were influenced by seven themes:

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships;
- 3) Desire for their lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;
- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational themes;
- 6) The perception of informal support; and
- 7) Formal protections.

Participants were directly affected by internalized messages which included the advice they received from family, friends, and colleagues both queer and heterosexual and the experiences shared by other queer educators. These messages increased fear of negative reactions, rejection and false accusations. In order to combat these negative

messages and challenge derogatory stereotypes, participants used the strategies of building relationships with district personnel and developing a positive reputation in the district prior to disclosing their sexuality. Regardless of where they were situated on the out continuum at work, all participants shared a desire for their lesbian identity to be a secondary identity to their identity as school administrators. While engaged in the relationship building process, participants listened for signs that they would be accepted regardless of their sexual orientation. The participants' efforts to build relationships and eventually reveal their sexual orientation were influenced by the idea that withholding information about their sexuality created barriers in the relationship building process and they weighed the potential risks and rewards of revealing their sexual orientation. At times, the presence or consideration of life changing events such as a civil union, the addition of children, or a life-threatening illness forced participants to disclose their sexual orientation earlier than planned.

Participants shared their perception that over the years, society as a whole has become more accepting of people who identify as gay and lesbian for several reasons including the increase in queer images in the media and the willingness of many to live implicitly and explicitly out. The presence of informal supports from the school community, queer colleagues and straight allies helped participants feel more comfortable positioning themselves as implicitly or explicitly out with district personnel. For participants, responses to questions regarding the impact of formal protections such as anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies that included sexual orientation varied. For participants who felt their districts honored and valued diversity, formal protections were seen as a nice gesture but not necessary. For participants who felt



vulnerable in their districts, formal protections in district policy were viewed as essential but ineffective without federal or state protections. These themes affected the participants' decisions regarding their positioning on the out continuum with district personnel; the factors influencing participants' choices regarding sharing their sexual orientation and details about their personal relationships with parents and students are explored in Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPANTS' POSITIONING WITH STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

#### Purpose

The purpose of Chapter Six is to explore the factors affecting the way participants situate themselves on the out continuum with students and their families. In Chapter Four, I introduced the participants with a snapshot of their personal and professional experiences with situating themselves on the out continuum with different audiences. In that chapter, I also explore the ways participants chose to disclose their identity, specifically the words they selected; I focused on the following questions: 1) How do participants describe their experiences with coming out to family and friends? 2) How does the way participants situate themselves on the out continuum with friends and family differ from the way they position themselves on the out continuum in the workplace with district personnel, families and students? 3) How do participants choose to disclose their sexuality in their professional experiences? What words do they choose and why do they choose these words?

In Chapter Five, I explored the themes that influenced where participants situated themselves on the out continuum with district personnel found in the participants' answers to the three questions listed above. The seven primary themes affecting the participants' positioning on the out continuum were:

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships;
- 3) Desire for lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;

- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational differences;
- 6) The perception of informal support; and
- 7) Formal protections.

In this chapter, I will examine the common themes found in participants' decisions to share or withhold information about their sexual orientation and personal relationships with parents and students and how this affected them as school administrators. In this chapter, I focused on four specific questions: 1) How do participants answer indirect and direct inquiries about their sexual orientation from parents of students? 2) How do participants answer indirect and direct questions about their sexuality from students? 3) Why did participants decide to answer questions from students and their parents in this way? 4) How do these decisions affect their relationships with students and their parents? In answering these questions, I found six common factors influencing participants' positioning on the out continuum with parents and students:

- 1) The ways participants answer inquires from parents;
- 2) The ways participants answer inquires from students;
- 3) Treatment of partner in conversations and public encounters;
- 4) Understanding of oppression;
- 5) Role model responsibilities; and

## 6) Don't Ask Don't Tell: The effects of the advice and experiences of others

I will explore these themes in detail in this chapter.

### Factors Influencing Participants' Positioning on the Out Continuum with Parents and Students

#### *Theme one: Inquiries from parents*

All of the participants had indirect inquiries from parents about their sexuality framed around marital status and children which they answered honestly. Seven of the eight participants answered the inquiries cautiously yet truthfully but did not mention or elaborate on their personal relationships. Participants viewed these inquiries from parents as an attempt to connect, a way to confirm, or an endeavor to obtain ammunition to be used later.

In Kayla's experience, she had witnessed another lesbian school administrator viciously attacked for her sexuality by a small group of vocal community members which included parents. As a way of protecting herself from the same fate, Kayla used the approach of abruptly and directly answering questions and ending the conversations as quickly as they began. Kayla avoided the topic whenever possible but still answered the questions as openly as she could without leaving herself vulnerable. Kayla described the way she answered inquiring parents:

I have parents that stop in my office now because they see my pictures of my daughter and their first question is, "Does she look like you? She doesn't really look like you. She must look like your husband." And I say, "She's not going to look like me - I adopted her." And that's how I field that question. I've had dads that are very open and very comfortable say, "I see your wedding ring. Are you married? Your husband must blah blah blah." And I say, "I'm not married." I just shut it down and change the conversation... I think because I don't elaborate - I just look at them and give them the one word or two word answer... It probably leaves them wondering or it lets them have the answer they think they wanted to

get out of me anyway; and for whatever reason, it never comes back up again.  
(Kayla 938 – 944, 947 – 948, 950 – 952)

Sela uses a similar approach in her responses to parents' questions; she answers honestly but vaguely. When she shared her experiences it was evident that Sela was conflicted over the desire to make human connection but feeling the need to shield herself from later persecution. While she answered the questions directly, she also realized that the inquirer came to their own conclusions based on her responses. Sela shares this experience:

I am very visible as a school administrator - you're very visible in the community, you're very visible at school, parents, students, teachers, and I'm always, particularly more so with parents than anybody else, waiting for that question: "Are you married? Do you have kids? Have you ever been married? Have you ever had kids? or What are you and your husband going to do?... I just say, "I'm not married." "Oh, okay." Now some of them will say, "Have you ever been married? Are you divorced?" I go, "Not divorced." "Oh, okay." And it's always that "Oh, okay" like "mmhmm let me think about this a little bit." But that, I think that's the hardest part. I think the only thing that has ever really bothered me is the visibility piece and people wanting to make that connection with you so they're going to try, they're going to start asking questions about you. (Sela 801 – 806, 812 – 817)

All of the participants shared a need to connect with the parents of students in their schools but were held hostage by the fear associated with parents discovering their sexuality and later using this information to threaten their careers. These feelings of terror limited their personal connections and left participants feeling less than their authentic selves with parents. As I will explore later in this section, the feelings of anguish and even terror associated with the ways parents could potentially respond were not always the result of firsthand experiences but could often be attributed to the stories told about the experiences of gay and lesbian educators in other districts.

Of all eight participants, Brittany was the only one that was implicitly out about her sexuality with parents. She did not have direct conversations with parents where she

specifically said that she was a lesbian, but she was open about her relationship with her partner; they attended school events and community events where parents were in attendance. Throughout her interview, Brittany shared a self-described “Pollyanna” naivety regarding her identity management with both district personnel and families; she decided to situate herself as implicitly and sometimes explicitly out in both situations. She received support and did not experience any overt negative reactions from district personnel or parents. Brittany did not focus on the possible ramifications of living openly; but she did censor references to her relationship and partner with students. Brittany described how she knew that parents were aware of the nature of her relationship and how they shared that with their children:

Kelly would volunteer at stuff and they would say, ‘Do you guys want to go have a drink?’ or ‘What are you guys doing? Do you want to...’ Then there became some friendships out of having worked with their children; and we just developed relationship out of that. And so some of those families did actually tell their children; now those children are, well for example, there’s one family that was from my original school that we’re friends with. And they’ve asked me to, I used to watch their kids when they went out of town. And so, they just told their children so they knew in elementary school that Miss Kelly is my special friend; but now they know more about the dynamics of our relationship. And for a lot of parents, they had conversations with their children once we had kids because it was kind of like, ‘Ms. Brittany has kids now.’ And so, some of those kids are older, they’re like late middle school/high school; so they’re old enough to have that conversation and level of understanding. (Brittany 216 – 229)

During the 10 years she has spent in the district, Brittany described her experiences with parents regarding her sexuality as positive and supportive.

During our conversations about interacting with parents, a subordinate theme found throughout the participants interviews was one of not directly verbally contributing to the knowledge that they were lesbian administrators but not hiding it either.

Participants vacillate on the out continuum between closeted and implicitly out with

parents. Participants considered this a less confrontational, safer way of disclosing their sexuality that allowed families to come to their own conclusions in their own time. Because participants were not directly saying, “I’m a lesbian” or “I have a girlfriend or partner” but attending events in the community with their partners or riding to and from work with them, families who witnessed these interactions could draw their own conclusions about their relationships. They could protect themselves by explaining public sightings as something other than a same-sex relationship if they felt threatened because participants did not directly disclose their sexuality. Adrian, a new assistant principal in a school where she taught prior to taking an administrative position, described her experience with parents and students in her district:

I mean I’ve never hidden it; but nobody has anything that they could... I’m pretty safe in that regard. I’ve never said anything that would say that I’m gay; we’re together a lot in the area, so they could put two and two together. But yeah, I just have never wanted to go there with kids or parents... A lot of the parents know, when we go we frequent places around here all the time; we see them when we are together all the time. I mean [my partner] and I are together all the time... I guess they might question it; but they’d have to be pretty ballsy to go there on their own. I’m not going to, I’m not going to stick the card in their pocket.  
(Adrian 108 – 112, 130 – 132, 225 - 226)

Lily was a school administrator during the 1980s; her experiences with parent inquiries were very different than the other participants. All of the other participants’ administrative experiences were more recent, either currently administrators or administrative experience within the last two years before moving to a central office position. While parents indirectly inquired about the other participants’ personal relationships, parents did not inquire about Abby or Lily’s marital status or if they had children during their time as building administrators. When asked if she had inquiries from parents, Abby responded,

You know what, nothing that is monumental to me. I would have steered a conversation away from it as much as I could have keeping it professional, keeping it about their kid or the school or anything like that. Yeah, I would have steered away from it. (Abby 232 – 235)

As a building administrator, Lily had gay and lesbian acquaintances who were parents of children in her schools but they never broached the subject of their sexual orientation.

She explained, “I can remember a couple I played ball with, couple I might have run into at the bar; but we were all about business when we were at school” (Lily 353 – 354).

Abby and Lily’s experiences are contrary to the experiences of the other participants. An explanation for that difference is sexual orientation has increasingly become a topic of conversation in the media, there are increased representations of queer characters on television, and more and more queer-identified people living openly in families; as a result, society has become more aware of issues of sexuality in schools over the last ten years. The participants all felt that this awareness has brought about anti-bullying measures, some attempts to include sexual orientation in anti-discrimination policies, and a shift in the boundaries surrounding what personal questions are acceptable to ask school professionals, including administrators.

While most participants had inquiries from parents about their personal relationships and families, one of the most glaring contradictions for participants was the belief that their sexual orientation was known by parents, but none had direct inquiries about their sexuality from parents. This unspoken understanding was a fascinating construct for participants and for me: participants did not offer information about their relationships spontaneously or when parents inquired indirectly and parents did not inquire directly further reinforcing the understanding of the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell culture referenced by participants and explored later in this chapter.



Participants' responses suggest an interesting paradigm associated with sexuality in our culture. As queer-identified individuals we are striving for acceptance and equality; but in our culture, because of the negative connotations associated with being queer, unless there are enough obvious signals presented by the person perceived as queer, most people will not ask directly about one's sexuality even if the assumption is the person is queer. Because of the damaging implications, when a person who identifies as heterosexual is assumed to be queer or is asked directly if he or she is queer, this is considered insulting. When applied to this research, this construct leaves the lesbian administrator attempting to shed negative stereotypes and feelings associated with being gay and therefore not feeling comfortable to share their sexual orientation; this is paired with students and families afraid to ask and be wrong because of the negative implications creating a tension that stifles dialogue. The question becomes, how do we have open dialogue about something that is considered so taboo in our culture, specifically in our schools, if we feel so paralyzed by fear we can't muster the courage to have these conversations?

Participants speculated about the reasons why parents did not directly inquire. The reasons ranged from respectful social boundaries to the assumption that parents did not want to confirm what they already knew. For example, in Alex's experience, she believed parents did not inquire because of the embarrassment associated with the possibility that they could be wrong in their assumption. She explains:

They never [ask]. I had a parent who was dropping food off when I was recovering from chemo; and so I have some parents I have talked with about it. Sometimes, I feel maybe a little like I should or shouldn't. No one has ever [asked] because it would be rude now wouldn't it? Because what if you're wrong; so they don't ask. (Alex 185 – 188)

In Adrian's experience, parents don't inquire because while they may know, they would rather not have it confirmed. When asked if there are people in the community that do not know about her sexuality, she replied "I think there [are] people in this town who because they haven't been told, pretend they don't know" (Adrian 479 – 480). This further signals to participants that the unofficial Don't Ask Don't Tell doctrine is the expectation in some school districts. Interestingly, this expectation appears to be self-imposed and further reinforced by dialogue with other queer administrators; I have come to this conclusions because participants within the same district had very different experiences and varying perceptions of the expectations around disclosing their sexuality.

All of the participants except Brittany were paralyzed by the potentially negative parental reaction to their sexuality if known; Maggie, Alex, Kayla and Abby all shared stories during which sexuality was referenced by parents in a negative way. Alex and Abby's experiences were limited to one encounter; Maggie's experience in her district was the most severe and occurred at times throughout her ten years as principal in her former school district. Maggie's experiences had a direct impact on Kayla, who was working in the same district at the time, specifically the way she situated herself on the out continuum with parents and students. Maggie recounts one of her first negative experiences with a parent early on as principal in her former district:

When we started the GSA at the high school, I had one community member who was just a jack ass. And he'd say something like, he came up one time and was bitching about something and he was like, 'I'm not talking to that fucking lesbian.' And the secretary was like whoa and of course they come running for me, 'That's what he said.' And I'm like, 'Okay, he's an idiot – thanks.' But he's in front of the media, when we started the gay straight alliance; and he's like, 'We need to get a new high school principal. This is wrong.' And I'm like, 'Well, I'm not in [my previous district] anymore. There's only one high school principal. He's talking about me.' God love him, his daughter was delightful, poor girl. But

so yeah, he was running a bit of a campaign because we shouldn't have a GSA. (Maggie 233 – 243)

Maggie's experiences continued and increased in the overt hatefulness throughout her time in her previous district. She shared an experience that occurred during her last year,

It started up because I was in Chicago at a conference had a friend call me from the city schools saying he heard I got fired. And I'm like what? And I didn't know - you gotta be kidding me; and I didn't think much of it. Now the superintendent mentioned when I was out of town that there was going to be a meeting [in the northern part of the district] which tends to be African American. That there's going to be a meeting - well okay, let me know, I can't be there because you're sending me to Chicago. She's like okay. And [I] came back and I'm like, "Anything I need to know?" "No, uneventful" exact words. A week later, another parent calls, an African American parent, she's like, "[Maggie] did you hear about the meeting?" She said people were standing up in this ward meeting screaming about, "What are you going to do about the gay principal at the high school? And I'm like, "What?" And it was weird because it was right, I probably got a half a dozen calls that I was getting fired and this was in October. (Maggie 385 – 398)

Maggie's negative experiences in her previous district were referenced by other participants in their interviews; the extent to which other's experiences are internalized and then influence the ways participants responded to situations in their own lives are explored later in this chapter.

Alex and Abby have only experienced one negative incident with parents; but these single experiences gave each insight into their internalized fears and the ways they work with parents currently. In Alex's experience:

I've had it used against me once by a parent in a negative context. Shockingly, it took to my fourth year for me; and I mean you deal with parents who are angry all the time that doesn't come up. So I it's my discomfort, it's not theirs. (Alex 218-221)

In Abby's experience:

I would say one time it came up in retaliation from a parent who is mentally ill; and she was really mad at me. She was African American; so I had suspended one or both of her sons and I mean she was pissed. So she was out in the commons area talking to me and [my assistant principal] was there with me; and of course,

he was no help at this point in time. But she said something about, ‘you’re objective is to get rid of all the black boys in this school and you stand here’ and then she started getting in my face. And she said, ‘don’t you think that I don’t know who you really are.’ And I said, ‘well the conversation’s over you know obviously we disagree that’s fine but it’s getting personal...’ I knew who she was - I just said whoa we’re getting a little nasty here. That’s really the only time that there was ever any reference to it. (Abby 654 – 662, 664 – 665)

Alex and Abby’s stories shared above paired with other examples of internalized oppression affected the way they interacted with parents around issues of sexuality.

Lilly, Brittany, Adrian and Sela have not experienced any negative interactions with parents around sexuality during their tenure as school administrators. Lily shared one experience during her first principalship thirty years ago where her sexuality was alluded to by a parent but the encounter was not negative:

I will say, I had one experience as an elementary principal, a parent walked in who worked at [a local university] and she said, ‘There is a young man in my husband’s department and I’d be happy to fix the two of you up, unless you don’t date men.’ At which point I was like uhlalalala, why would she think that? Why would she say that to me? Even though, I thought it was a very kind thing later; at the time, I was unprepared. So I just was deflecting. (Lily 188 – 194).

In Lily’s experience, this parent was trying to personally connect with Lily or attempting to signal to Lily that if she was a lesbian, it was okay. While this happened close to thirty years ago, these are the subtle openings that could facilitate the personal dialogue needed to be more open about our sexuality in daily conversations with parents.

### *Theme two: Inquiries from students*

There were variances in the experiences of the participants regarding the types of direct and indirect inquiries from students addressing sexuality or marital status. These differences are attributable to generational changes in student populations, the age of participants, and the age of student population. Lily, the oldest participant who was last in a building-level administrative position twenty years ago, stated that students never asked

her about her marital status, her family or direct questions about her sexuality. When asked why, Lily said “I don’t know that I would allow myself to be that available. I think I have been good at making some parts of me inaccessible for some people (900 – 901).” Lily was a principal during a time when there was an absence of queer representations in the media and in the day-to-day experiences of most students. Throughout her interviews, Lily references her persona of “being all about the business” at school. Initially in our conversation, she stated this approach was necessary because of the dire condition of her schools; but later, she admitted that it might have been a survival tactic she used to limit personal conversations that could have turned toward her personal relationships and to guard against unwanted inquiries about her sexual orientation.

Except for Lily, all of the other participants had encountered students asking questions about their marital status and children. These exchanges elicited feelings of anxiety and dishonesty from some participants because they did not elaborate on their personal relationships or their families. All responded to the questions honestly or deflected the questions with humor; the participants with children acknowledged their children but did not elaborate on their current relationships. For example, Abby’s response to the inquiries from middle school students was “Sometimes with kids - they’ll go you’re married? And I would say, ‘No, I’m not married.’ Do you have kids? ‘No, I don’t have any kids.’” (Abby 277 – 278). This was the typical response from most participants. In Adrian’s experience, also with middle school students,

Oh absolutely, kids have asked if I’m married. Kids have; I’ve used every line from I’m too young to be married or nobody’s special enough to get... I’ve thrown it off with whatever sort of joke you can imagine... I’ve also never said I’m in a relationship; I’ve just always like joked off the question. (Adrian 195 – 197, 199 – 200)

When asked why she didn't answer the question directly and how that felt, Adrian said,

I mean it feels like they want to know; I mean every other teacher tells them if they're married or not married... Like I wish I could but I'm just, I'm not here to tell kids about my personal life, I'm here to teach them and help them figure out who they are. If me telling them about my personal life, they go home and that triggers some sort of negative response or if it ends up being counterproductive, it's just not worth it to me. (Adrian 202 – 203, 205 – 208)

All of the participants except Lily expressed a desire to be more honest in their responses to inquiries from students but were held hostage by the fear of the way parents could respond to this disclosure; these feelings of paralyzing fear are explored later in this chapter.

Despite their unwillingness to openly share details about their personal relationships, all of the participants believed their sexual orientation was known by students in their schools, specifically in the high schools. The elementary and middle school principals thought the signals about their sexuality were present but for students at that age, the sexuality of their principals was not at the forefront of their thinking. Five of the eight participants were never asked directly about their sexual orientation by students but the thought that they could be asked directly was always in the back of their minds. Alex, a high school principal, shared a story about a discussion students had about her sexuality when she was not present during her first year as principal:

[The students] know; but I've never told them. Kids aren't stupid; my first year here, the journalism teacher told me this story, that when I got hired in May and they were doing this story or it might have even been in the fall, the issue came up in their newspaper meetings and my cousin who was a freshman or early sophomore at the time says, I do know and it doesn't matter and that stopped the discussion. Well it's the kind of thing that a straight person doesn't pick up on, what she basically did was confirm it because had she said I do know, she has a boyfriend but she didn't do that. So what she in essence did was confirm it to everyone but at the same time close the door of making it a discussion point... I know that I am not out to the kids; so I am very sensitive and aware of that. And at the same time, I know perfectly well that most of them know exactly what I am

or who I am which makes it an odd construct. You know and I know, I know that you know, you know that I know that you know, but neither of us are talking about it so we're just going to ignore that fact. So I don't do the interview about Prop 8; I think they did an article about gay marriage separate from that, they didn't come talk to me about it which is just a little bit silly. (Alex 142 – 151, 385 - 392).

Alex was recently engaged to her partner and has experienced great angst over the decision to wear her engagement ring at school, a ring she described as “very traditional.” In each of our interviews, Alex returns to the conflict over the decision of whether or not to wear her engagement ring at school. She wants to wear the ring and celebrate her engagement with the faculty at her school but balances that with not wanting to give students an opening to inquire about her engagement and therefore her sexuality. She shared her thoughts:

Right now it means not wearing the ring because I feel like that once I do that then I have given the students the opening to be able to ask me about it. Right now, it would be inappropriate... They never ask. It's fascinating. (Alex 178 – 181, 183)

Alex's decision making process of whether to wear the ring or not to wear the ring parallels the decision making process for participants around displaying pictures of their partners and other personal artifacts in their offices. Placing pictures of their partners either individually or as a couple in their offices was seen as an invitation for questions from students and others visiting their offices. Six of the eight participants decided to leave the pictures of their partners at home. When I asked Lily if she displayed a picture of her partner in her office, she shared:

No. I came through the era where that kind of stuff was so invisible. There is a piece of me that finds it to be a kin to heterosexual flaunting of heterosexism; and so I kind of don't... The most recent family pictures we have, my partner's in her collar also - I just I just don't need it at work. I don't choose to do it; it's a kind of flaunting I just find it really inappropriate. Nobody is coming into my office to talk to me about my family. (Lily 590 – 595)

When I pressed Lily further about the absence of a picture that could only be seen by her that would denote her and her partner as a couple she continued: “Yeah, so okay, maybe it’s a statement about something else.” (Lily 598). When asked why she does not have a picture of her partner in her office, Maggie said, “I’m just not going to attract any attention to it. You know there’s that hornet’s nest there, but if you’re smart you don’t hit it with the baseball bat.” (Maggie 525 – 526) For Maggie, it seemed to be enough of a statement to be implicitly out in her district without using pictures as a reminder for those who would rather forget. When I asked Alex, she said that she considered bringing in a picture of her partner and was close to doing so; but like the engagement ring, it was a decision she struggled with regularly. Contrarily, Abby felt comfortable having a picture of her partner in her office; but decided not to display a picture because her partner was an employee in the school district.

Unlike some of the other participants, Sela had a picture of her partner in her office but they were not pictured together. She displayed a picture of her partner and referred to her as her best friend or roommate when students inquired. At one point between one of our conversations, Sela had an experience with an inquiring student. She shared the experience:

The only kid who’s ever inquired was the next week after we had our conversation. And she was looking at all of our pictures and she said, she went through everyone of these pictures, and she asked me who each of these people were and then she goes, ‘Are you married Ms. [Sela]?’ And I said, ‘No.’ ‘Do you have children Ms. [Sela]?’ ‘No.’ ‘Okay.’ She asked me who [Sandra] was and I said ‘That’s my roommate.’ And she goes ‘Okay’ and it was not too long after that she goes, ‘Are you married Ms. [Sela] (laughing)?’ ‘No.’ The ones that have asked questions like that are usually ones that are in my office all of the time. (Sela 782 – 286, 788 – 791)



Brittany, the participant who was the most open about her sexuality in her district, had pictures of her family in her office that included pictures of her partner and children.

While six of the eight participants chose not to have pictures of their partners in their offices, all participants with children chose to display pictures of their children in their offices even though the pictures increased the number of questions asked by students. Kayla shared what it has meant to her to be able to display a picture of her new baby in her office:

There's pictures of the baby all over the place. That's been the nice thing because with having a baby, you're able to... Me, I get to look at [my partner] every day on my desk because that's the spitting image of [my partner]. When we had the first six week pictures made, each of us were holding her in our hands. The picture I took and put on my desk was [my baby] in [my partner's] hands; so I, in my little sick mind, got to have a picture of [my partner] on my desk for the first time. (Kayla 463 – 469)

But when asked further why she didn't display a picture of her partner in her office Kayla countered:

It's that putting it in people's faces to me; it's the asking for questions I'm not willing to share. Again, like I said earlier, my personal life is my personal life. If I have pictures of her on my desk, because already with baby pictures, "Is that your baby?" No, it's my freaking cousin's kid that I have seven pictures of in my office. (Kayla 480 – 484)

Kayla's response captured a feeling of defensiveness and irritation that were present throughout her interviews which could be read in two ways: disappointment in herself for not being more willing to put the information out there through pictures and in conversation or aggravation that while the signals are there and the assumption is that everyone knows about her sexuality, people are still asking questions that force her to either be disingenuous or directly out herself.

When the five who had not been directly asked about their sexuality were asked how they would respond to a student if asked if they were lesbian, the responses varied from deflection to disclosure depending on the student and the circumstances. It was clear from all five participants that the decision to directly disclose their sexual orientation to a student would be a decision they made only after great thought which would be difficult given how quickly the question could be asked by a student in conversation. Each participant also said the decision to disclose would be directly related to the student's intentions and the relationship she had with the student. Adrian shared her thoughts,

It would depend on the student. It would depend on the situation. It would depend on how they were asking. If some student's pissed at me and says, "What are you some lesbian or something?" I'm probably not going to say yes - so it would be situational. If I had student in my room who was having a meltdown, having major issues at home and ends up confessing to me that they are gay, they've confided in me because they think I am, I'd say you know what you're right, you have an advocate here. You have someone who understands what you've been through, no problem; but I think it's situational and I don't think all middle schoolers developmentally are at a stage where they can handle certain information. (Adrian 674 – 683)

Three of the participants, Kayla, Sela and Maggie, all high school administrators, have been asked directly by students about their sexuality. Kayla and Sela said the inquiries were infrequent, occurring only a couple of times during their careers. Maggie stated that she was asked two or three times a year by students. The way they responded to students' inquiries varied. Kayla and Maggie deflected the conversation back to the inquiring student but confirmed their sexuality through nonverbal cues such as smiling or nodding. Kayla recounts one of her experiences with a curious student,

I said, 'I can't answer that.' I just kind of grinned at her and said, 'You know I can't answer that question.' And she said, 'Okay, that's what I wanted to hear.' She had asked me, 'How do you know?' Because her first question was, 'Are you gay?' And I said, 'I can't answer that question.' And she said, 'Well how do you know if you're gay?' And I said, 'I would imagine if you are attracted to

someone, then that's who you are attracted to. It doesn't matter if they're a boy or a girl. That's how you know.' I freaked out. I felt like I was going to throw up... (Kayla, 678 – 689)

In Maggie's experience,

Kids will come in because you know they're dealing with their identity. And this is probably the most hypocritical moments in my life, I hate it; but kids come in throw themselves down they're like going through all this inner turmoil about who am I. And they're like, '[Maggie] you're gay right?' And then you're like, 'Let's talk about you. Why are you asking?' I totally put it off just because basically everybody that's ever advised me is like... Nobody's asked me directly here [in my current position]. At [my former school], a couple times a year that somebody would be dealing with something and I'd be like, 'That's not important, let's talk about you.' So in that regard, I felt like it was a huge disservice. I didn't know how to get around that. I'm not sure if a kid plopped themselves in my office next week and did that, how I would respond either... I don't know. I think I would probably deflect again just because it needs to be something that is on my terms. (Maggie 176 – 183, 904 – 910).

The nonverbal confirmation of their sexuality paired with deflecting the question back to the student was an example of confirming without saying the words. It was also an example of staying safe by not giving anyone any verbal confirmation that could eventually be used negatively in a later situation. Nonverbal confirmation is a matter of the perception of the other person, easily denied if brought up later.

The way Sela responded to inquiries from students paralleled the way the participants who had not received direct inquiries said they would respond. When asked about her encounters with inquiring students, Sela's responded:

Depends on the student. A lot times I'll say, 'Does it matter? Why does it matter?' I've said that before... After I said, 'Why does it matter?' 'Well I just wondered. My brother's gay or my sister's gay or my...' And I said, 'Well would it matter you?' 'No, not really.' 'Well okay, yes.' But those are kids that are older. I wouldn't... It really sounds weird, but I have to really build a relationship with them; I wouldn't do it with a kid right now that's a freshman or sophomore. When you get to that senior year and they're moving on and a lot of times the kids who are asking me are kids who are. And yeah, and they just want a comfort of knowing that it's okay. Few and far between but yes. (Sela 1046 – 1047, 1051 – 1058)

The question produced gut-wrenching anxiety for participants when asked by a student. For students to feel comfortable answering truthfully, the inquiry from a student had to feel genuine and there needed to be a reason for the question that would help the student in some way. The cornerstone of the decision was based on the depth and quality of the relationship with the student; the maturity of the student was also considered. The decisions to refrain from answering questions directly produced feelings of guilt in the participants; these feelings are explored later in this chapter.

*Theme three: Treatment of partner in conversations and public encounters*

All participants are partnered; five of the eight participants are in relationships with other educators. The experiences of the participants introducing their partners to students and parents both at school functions and in the community varied. Some introduced their partners as friends, other by name without a title. For example, Brittany introduced her partner by name to both students and parents at school functions and in conversations but only titles her as her partner in conversations with parents.

I had not had conversations with students about our relationship and what the significance of it was; but they knew Heather because they knew her from being at school events. So someone would say, ‘Where’s your friend Miss Heather?’ That was about the maximum conversation with students - families knew and I just left it up to them to choose what... I would have loved to have been more honest; but I just wasn’t sure they were ready for that and not knowing their parents’ viewpoints on it. So I thought that was the most honest way that would not create waves. So yeah, it bothered me; but I just didn’t want to open up that conversation for the kids and their families if they weren’t at a place where they were ready to tackle that. (Brittany, 207 – 211, 236 - 240).

Contrarily, Lily, the oldest participant who was last a principal over 20 years ago, did not bring her partner to school events or refer to her in conversations with parents and

students. She described a separation of her personal and professional lives during her time as a building-level school administrator:

I compartmentalized my life. I worked hard and I played hard. I preferred to be in predominantly lesbian company when I was not at work; and I did not have the capacity to integrate those two worlds... I was very good at always talking in first person; and it was never we, it was I and some friends. I could share all that kind of stuff; but I never had the comfort nor the desire to talk about my relationships, my personal relationships. And I really, I guess I didn't care if they speculated. (Lilly, 103 – 105, 276 - 279)

During conversations with students and parents about personal experiences, the other six participants changed their partners to friend status or pluralized the pronouns to include others in their stories. Only two participants ever referred to their partners as “he” in conversations; when asked, most said they could find other ways to mask their partners' identity without changing their gender. When asked about their partners' participation in school events involving students, some said their partners would attend school functions with them as a friend or in a group of other people. At these activities, their partners were never introduced to students or parents as their partners, always as a friend or by name. Six of the participants were involved at some point in relationships with women who worked in their districts during their administrative careers; all six described at least one time when they attended a school event involving students with their partners. During most of these activities, their partners were in attendance but it was not evident to anyone that they were in a relationship. Overall, participants justified their partners' limited participation as a lack of interest in taking part in student activities. Alex described the conflict between having her partner attend functions and feeling comfortable bringing her:

I've had friends whose relationships have ended because of that exact issue - where their partner or their boyfriend or girlfriend was unhappy that they were hidden away. There's two times when [my partner] has come to a school event:

one was the musical and we had another friend with us and the other was a trivia night and we had another friend. So it wouldn't necessarily be the two of us which two parts to that: one is let's be real how many of these events does she really want to come to? I mean if I had a husband I don't know that I would force him to go prom. Having said that, the fall play, the musical it would be nice if like a lot of couples that she would come with me. (Alex, 269 – 277)

School events were not the only places the participants and their partners' encountered students or parents. To limit the number of interactions with parents and students in the community, many participants chose to live outside of their district boundaries. If they lived near their districts of employment, some participants frequented different grocery stores or other establishments to avoid public encounters. Other participants chose to spend time with their partners in the communities where they worked; they did not attempt to conceal their relationships but were not overtly affectionate in public.

Regardless of their efforts to limit contact, encounters with parents and students in the community were inevitable. When participants interacted with students or parents in public spaces such as grocery stores or restaurants and their partners were present, they were introduced by name or with the qualifier of "this is my friend". When asked how their partners reacted to public encounters with parents or students, three participants specifically stated that they drifted or faded away when parents or students approached rather than stay to be introduced. When asked how she handled community interactions with students and parents, Alex said,

Typically [my partner] will melt away. For example, if we're grocery shopping and a parent comes up, she'll just sort of continue down the aisle. Occasionally, I've introduced her... Oh, she's fine with it. I never told her to do that, she just started. I mean the first time she just sort of disappeared - I said where did you go? She's like, well I saw that you were talking with a parent so I just didn't want to... I would say she reads my body language. It's rare that I would introduce [her] mostly because I can't remember names very well; but there have been

times. I would say more often than not she'll just sort of drift away or I will introduce her as a friend of mine. (Alex, 337 – 339, 343 – 347)

When asked how they felt about these encounters, all participants stated they felt somewhat disingenuous when introducing their partners as friends. Some participants introduced their partners by name only without a qualifier in an attempt to be more respectful of their relationship and more honest with the audience. In some situations, the participants described interactions where they introduced their partners as friends and the other person immediately began treating them as their partner. It seemed that while they did not introduce their partners with the title of partner, the audience was aware that they were indeed in a committed relationship. Alex shared,

It feels a little wrong to say that and a little embarrassing to say it. I'm trying to think about it; but I do find that there are times when I have introduced her as my friend and then the person I'm talking to immediately treats her as my partner or references her later, which I find fascinating. (Alex 1451 – 1454)

When probed about how their partners felt about their limited participation in school events and by the vague introductions, participants said they were not concerned by this because they understood the need for discretion as lesbian school administrators especially when working with students and parents. This rationalization was frequently used by participants. Five of the participants were partnered with other educators; presumably, because their partners were also in education and understand the dynamics of being a lesbian educator, it could be less of an issue in their relationships. Adrian and Sela both said that if they thought their partners wanted more from them in this regard, they would be more troubled. Sela explained,

It sometimes, it's a little upsetting; but if I thought my partner wanted more, I would, I'd be a little bit more upset. But I think we're both comfortable with that.

We have talked about it - we talk about it a lot. Part of it I think is because she understands the role that you have to play. (Sela, 226 – 233)

All participants were in relationships with partners who they believed understood why they needed to be guarded about the nature of their relationships, specifically when interacting with students and families at school events and in the community. The need to protect themselves from what they perceived to be the risks associated with implicitly or explicitly revealing their sexual orientation which are explored later in this chapter prevailed over their need to be truthful about their personal relationships.

#### *Theme four: Understanding of oppression*

The most consistent theme throughout the interviews was the theme of feeling participants had a better understanding of oppression because they were members of an oppressed group. Throughout their interviews, the participants referenced fear and experiences of discrimination, but never referred to their experiences as oppressive. Oppression was unnamed in their own experiences yet a common theme with regard how their experiences influenced their work with students. Oppression was only referenced by participants during conversations about working with students; participants never used the words oppressed or oppression to describe their personal or professional experiences directly.

When asked how their sexual orientation affects their work with students, all participants referenced an insight into oppression or working with minorities because of their own minority status as lesbians. Lily's thoughts,

I have always thought that being a lesbian gave me a particular understanding to oppression. I think that's important as a school administrator; because I think if we continue to perpetuate oppression, we're shooting ourselves in the foot... I think the greatest gift is my understanding of oppression and the intuition that I attributed. I don't know what that comes from, but I attributed my understanding



of life as a lesbian. And I use it sometimes to generalize on in terms of just when people feel like they don't fit, they feel the pain of name calling whatever it is. So it impacts my relationships in that I'm pretty keen about paying attention to the emotional side of learning and being in schools. (Lily, 602 – 604, 888 - 893)

Sela talked about her work with students,

I know my identity as a lesbian helps me in my interaction with kids and parents in a variety of ways - specifically kids who come who are struggling with their own identity. I can, I have some empathy and can talk with them. Kids who are feeling like they're harassed - there are other people who might not have the same empathy and be able to work with that... I've lived in a world where people have had to go through a lot of those same kinds of issues. I also think that I seem to connect with minorities on a different level or those who have been oppressed on a different level because we are part of an oppressed group... I also try to be a little bit I try to be open and listen and see all sides to a situation because I've been a part of an oppressed group that never got their side heard – and I don't want to be the oppressor. (Sela 556 – 560, 564 – 567, 569 – 571)

The participants' struggles with their own identities resulted in a lens of understanding for students' spoken and unspoken struggles with their identities, specifically students questioning their sexuality and their feelings of not fitting in with others. Alex shared,

I understand and can empathize with them when it can be hard to be different or struggle with who you are. I can empathize and go there with them when they're clearly trying to figure out their place in life. I think it makes me a little bit more attuned to those kind of issues. (Alex 1184 – 1187)

In Adrian's experience she uses her experiences to build relationships with students:

Every administrator draws on, you try to make that connection with a kid. When a kid gets in here for behavior, you try to make that connection; how can I relate to what this kid's going through right now. The kid doesn't have to be gay for me to understand why as a minority he might be acting the way he did and lashed out the way that he did. I get it, I am a minority in part of my life; I draw from there. (Adrian 841 – 845)

Participants used their own struggles to build relationships and connect with students; and their experiences also gave the participants particular insight into the hurtfulness of bullying and name calling in schools. They used this insight in helping to

craft anti-bullying policy and when enforcing anti-bullying policies in place to help students who may be targeted because of their sexuality. Lily's approach,

Okay and it was very clear to me that if I'm going to take a stand against name calling, then I can apply that across the board and so once applied across the board, then I help people work through the fag piece and the gay piece. Because initially, people are nervous like what if he is or oops how do we do something about this because after all people have religious beliefs. And I'm like huh uh, this is not about religion, this is not even about ideology; fag is not this child's name, this is name calling and we're taking a stand against name calling. So I was able to for me in language that I now have, I would put it in a social justice context. (Lily, 746 - 753)

Working to protect students from anti-gay harassment and bullying while carrying a lesbian identity created a tension for some participants. Specifically with Kayla and Lily, there was a reference to balancing the need to address bullying and name calling without being perceived as operating from a gay or lesbian agenda. Lily recounts a conversation she had with her new superintendent:

I said you know the one arena that we can actually all agree on is anti-bullying and name calling. I said I really don't think there's any dispute and that's where I wanted to get people into the folds so sexuality can actually be discussed; because there's no way to talk about name calling and not talk about fag and gay. (Lily, 956-959)

Kayla talks about the questions she asks herself while addressing anti-gay rhetoric from students:

The jargon that kids use, the slander; correcting it. Am I correcting it too much? Am I supersensitive to it? Some of the other stuff - it's kind of a personal thing. I try not to be too, I don't like that this is the way I think about it. I'm a very organized person. I'm a very, this is what we're supposed to do and sometimes some people like to relate that to me being too gay, a pushy dyke. (Kayla, 1158 – 1162)

Participants recognized their experiences with oppression and how that affected their work with students who carried minority status or were members of oppressed groups. They used this understanding in their day-to-day informal interactions and also through

enforcing district policies on harassment and bullying; they did this cautiously. The theme of understanding oppression was sewn throughout participants' responses when I asked them how being a lesbian school administrator affected their work with students. Participants shared their belief that they could better understand oppression because of their minority status as lesbians; other than their work with anti-bullying initiatives, they did not expand on how they could use their experiences to help students in oppressive situations within their schools. This is an emerging theme for participants: the lack of critical reflection found in their responses supports the need for further research in this area which I will explore further in Chapter Seven.

*Theme five: Role model responsibilities*

One of the most consistent and heartfelt themes in this study was the tension over being a positive lesbian role model for students while protecting themselves personally and professionally from the discrimination that could come from positioning themselves implicitly or explicitly out as a lesbian administrator. All participants expressed guilt over their decisions to live closeted, specifically with students. They expressed feelings of being torn between the need to protect themselves personally and professional and the need to present as a self-assured, positive role model for students struggling with their sexual identity. Participants explored the tension between the reality that their students are aware of their sexuality yet they are not honest with them because the fear that their sexuality could be used to persecute them. Alex shared the anguish she ascribed to her internal conflict:

So do I think they know? Yes, I think they are all fully aware, most of those that pay attention are fully aware, which begs the question, do I give them a disservice by not allowing my life fully to be embraced by them and the answer to that is yes... But I probably do them a disservice by not being fully honest with them

because that's how I feel, that I'm not fully honest with them. (Alex 473 – 476, 485 – 487)

Kayla justified decision her to position on the out continuum with a different perspective:

I don't walk into functions holding hands with [my partner]. I don't have my big rainbow flag hanging in my office; but I live my life as a positive role model for those kids. And I also don't as much as I cannot, I don't hide myself from people... Because while I say that I'm not out, like we talked earlier, nobody asks so they either don't care or they already know. My idea is in being a positive role model, someday when they either figure it out or they're old enough, they're out of school, and I'm able to tell them, then they can look back and go, 'Okay yeah, you were a good role model.' It doesn't matter if I was gay, straight whatever; I was a good role model for those kids. (Kayla 1048 – 1050, 1053 – 1058)

Participants shared an interest in reaching out to students who are struggling with their sexuality. Lily shared her thoughts on working with a student she perceived to be struggling with his sexuality as a hearing officer in her district:

I had one kid who gave the appearance that he was gay yet works really hard. He doesn't do anything about his appearance; but his family is all over him anyway. What I could tell was he was completely caught in this tension; and so I talked to him but I didn't out him and I wasn't going to create a thing for his family. I don't even remember what I said; it was clear to me that the reason he was sitting in my office was because he was caught. We didn't talk about him being gay... I think it's a really tricky thing for adults to do that when it's not initiated by the kids. The reason I do is because I've watched adults do it; and if I were in the kids' shoes, I would feel like I'm an opportunistic experiment on the part of the adults. Now I also project my own caution about outing myself on to that; there's a piece about being identified as a lesbian versus being identified as a person and I'm sensitive about that with the kids. I want to feel that I honor them as a person. And then if there's a chance to talk about who they are a person in more detail fine; but I don't want them to feel like an icon or a stereotype or a singular definition. (Lily 918 – 923, 926, 928 – 936).

In Sela's experience working with high school students who are in the process of exploring their own sexual identity and their maturity level affects what information she is willing to share about herself:

Being at a high school level, you see kids more as not equals but more as young adults that can handle more, that can take on more and can handle it in a mature manner. Where as a middle school level, we all know they giggle about all the

comments or little things. So they aren't really mature enough to handle that. And I think that you see more kids at the high school level who are really coming into to who they believe they are; and so it is more important to be more open and honest with them or to be able to at least approach the conversation with them because they're just trying to figure it out themselves in terms of their own sexuality. (Sela 1268 – 1276)

Sela articulately shared the reasons she wanted to be open with students about our sexuality, as did most of the participants but their fear of the ramifications of disclosure usurped the needs of the students struggling with their identity. Adrian expressed her thoughts on watching students fight their sexuality yet not reaching out to them, what that connection might mean for them as they battle with their identity and attempt to make connections with others who are gay or lesbian:

I'd be interested in knowing if the other people you talked to feel like they owe it to other kids who are identifying themselves as gay or lesbian to be a role model for them. Do they say they should have taken those kids under their wing? Is it your job to seek out those kids and help them get through this time better because you've been through it? Because there's times that I can see, I see kids in our hallway; and I'm like, a few years from now that kid's going to get it. Or oh that guy, this is all going to make sense in a few years. There's that piece of me that thinks he probably needs me to be a mentor or she needs me to mentor and I don't go there... I don't necessarily seek them out; but I wonder if I should or I wonder if... I think it's one of those, one of our jobs as educators is to show kids all the viable options they have; and this is just one that is taboo. It's not going to make any of the textbooks; or I don't know, it's just its taboo. I wish that it wasn't. But then there's that piece of me that thinks if 100 students of 1000 students I've had in my career, if they'd known that I'd been in a relationship while I was teaching them, that I was going home to somebody every night and cooking dinner and that we are happy and that's why I come to school in a great mood everyday and that's why I want to get home as soon as school ends, would that help them make different choices in their lives? Would they figure it out sooner? Would it help them understand an aunt or uncle or sister or brother better? I think it would. I think it would. I mean for all those reasons, I share the guilt. I just don't know if the guilt's pushing me to action. I think it will. I don't know if guilt will; I think time will, I think comfort will. But the guilt's there. (Adrian 1158 – 1166, 1170 – 1184)

Interestingly, all of the participants spoke about a desire to be a role model for students struggling with their sexuality but none of the participants referenced any school

personnel in their own experiences who were living openly as role models when they were in school. Kayla referenced a former teacher that shared with her later that she was a lesbian but she did not disclose that information to her while Kayla was her student. We can only speculate about how the presence of a lesbian school administrator living implicitly or explicitly out during the participants' formative years would have affected their decisions to live implicitly or explicitly out about their sexual orientation with students in their current positions. Would those negative internalized messages have had the same effect if they were combated with a lesbian role model who was confident in her identity and open about her sexuality?

Participants acknowledged the existence of negative stereotypes associated with being gay or lesbian in society; they believed their physical presence, while not out or even open with students, helped combat stereotypes and create space for queer issues in schools, specifically for students. When asked if she felt she needed to live openly to challenge stereotypes in schools, Sela replied,

No I don't. Working with kids, I think one of the things working with the kids, one of the nice parts about that is to have a conversation sometimes about what life looks like from varied angles. And when, for example, had a young lady come in last week and tell me that she didn't feel comfortable in a class because out at park one night, one of the kids in the class had called her a dyke. And she said "And the funny thing is, I am. He didn't know it but I am." So it was nice to be able to have conversation with her about that piece of it. I don't know whether she thinks I am or not; but she was, in having the conversation and then help her understand. Then move to the point of "Okay we know what we can do to help you right now; but let's look at life in general, you're going to have people make those kind of comments about you. You're going to have resistance. How are you going to be able to deal with that on your own? And what that will look like?" So when you talk about how working with kids - I think having those experiences can help in that respect. (Sela 959 – 972).

All participants were asked about using schools as a place to change attitudes about sexuality, both with queer-identified students and with students who identified as straight.

When asked about changing attitudes about sexuality in schools, Adrian responded,

I think that we change attitudes if we come out in schools, absolutely. Do I wish that I had the guts to do it so that I could do it, absolutely. Do I have all the respect in the world for people who have the guts to do it? Yes, I thank them. I wish I could be one of them; it's just, I consciously choose not to do it though. It's not that I couldn't, I could I consciously choose not to. I appreciate them for doing it. (Adrian 877 – 882)

A common approach used by all participants was relationship building as a way to build a foundation of acceptance prior to disclosure of sexual orientation or to combat negative stereotypes associated with lesbian identity. Participants used the strategy of letting people get to know them, building relationships, establishing personal connections with sexuality left unspoken as a way to challenge stereotypes without living implicitly or explicitly out with parents and students. At one point, Alex references Harvey Milk's ideology,

The movie *Milk*, we talked about another time but his belief that everyone should be as out as they can be to people they work with and people they lived around because as soon as they knew you as individual then a lot of the biases fall away, the fear or the unknown other. There's part of me that knows or feels that even if it's an unstated or the worst secret in [this community], that my living a normal life, my having the ethical standards and beliefs that I have and just being, allows people to perhaps throw away some of the stereotypes that they might hold... For our students, I think that it helps them to see people in various roles and being just normal people that gives them a role model to strive towards. (Alex 1502 – 1508, 1511 – 1512).

In using this approach, in order for Alex to be considered a positive lesbian role model for students, there is the assumption that students know about her sexual orientation. The internalized messages of negativity in our society associated with being lesbian paralyze her from direct disclosure. Because Alex has not disclosed her sexuality implicitly or

explicitly, there are unintended messages sent to students about personal acceptance and society's acceptance of queer-identified individuals. These unintended messages are explored further later in the chapter. Sela explained her thoughts about building relationships as a way to challenge stereotypes similarly to Alex,

I think experiences with people when they get to know you and get to like you and then find out that's who you are, has to challenge those assumptions of the stereotypes or the assumptions of what every lesbian looks like or what every gay man looks like or acts like... I feel like I do have a responsibility and an obligation; but I don't feel like I have to be, I don't have to overtly say "I'm gay" in order to do that. I feel like I can challenge those assumptions and I can try to debunk stereotypes without that. And because people are getting to know me for who I am and maybe some are assuming I'm gay and maybe some aren't. And maybe at some point in time, like within my previous school when someone outs me and they find out that that could actually cost me my job, it will hit people. It will hit home with people a little more because they know me for who I am and they care about it for me as an individual and that is just a small piece of it. (Sela 977 – 980, 1803 – 1811).

Maggie shared the tensions around providing students with 'real-life' gay role model yet not feeling comfortable in disclosing her sexuality implicitly or explicitly to students:

I think that's one of the things that as I kind of evolve, that is a struggle. Because I think too, A: they need good role models, B: Who is it? [a local reporter], about a year ago did "This Is the Face of Gay" that's on TV, the face of gay that most people think about is not the face of gay. So yes, I struggle with that and there will come a point where I'm just like, "You know what, yeah, this is where I am - deal with it, whatever." And honestly I think that place for me is not very far away; because I think too, people just need to know. I mean for god sake, I'm about as boring as they come. We're not all wild running out to [the local lesbian bar.] (Maggie 1429 – 1437)

Kayla specifically shared an internal conflict around positioning herself as implicitly or explicitly out when working with students she saw as impressionable. She explains, "I think again when it boils down to [it] you're shaping young children's lives - their thoughts, their feelings. When you have control of things like that, people freak out with what you do behind closed doors" (Kayla 1247 – 1250). Kayla talked about the



students she sees that are struggling with their identity but doesn't feel as though she can approach those students and have conversations about identity. When asked why she did not feel those conversations were appropriate, Kayla replied, "Because I've made it a point that I don't walk around telling everybody that I'm gay; I have to be very careful with that. I feel like that would give my district the gumption to find something to fire me for." (Kayla 616 – 618) Instead, Kayla used other approaches to help students who are struggling, "I have found other ways to deal with that. I will turn to the counselor, a couple of the counselors. We have a fantastic social worker; and I will look at the social worker and go, "seriously this one is struggling with sexual identity" (Kayla 620 – 622).

For all of the participants, there was enough guilt as a result of living closeted with students that they looked for ways to operate behind the scenes to help students struggling with their sexuality. When prompted further, participants explored the unintended messages kids receive when school administrators chose not to disclose their sexuality to students even when their sexual orientation is known to them. Alex shared,

They're enough people for them to talk to that they don't need to talk to me. At the same time, I also know that I could be, if I were truly out, I could be a role model for kids. I could and the fact that, I'm not sends a message to them... But I also don't want to be the gay principal; I don't want to discuss it with [the media]. I don't want to be put in that corner "the gay lesbian principal" because that's not who I mean that's just part of who I am. I'm very proud of who I am. (Alex 392 – 395, 397 - 400)

When asked if we send unintended messages to students when we live closeted Sela responded,

Yeah, I do. I think a lot of there's always, there's a lot of assumptions by people. And just like the question of "Who's this?" or "Are you married?" that kind of thing. And I feel bad a lot of times that I have to be guarded; because it does send a message to kids that it's not okay, that it's not okay to be out, that if you want to live this life, then you have to sometimes temper that. (Sela 951 – 955).

Alex, Kayla and Adrian all shared the realization that living closeted with students did not send a good message but expressed that they were not willing, at this time, to live differently. When asked about the messages, Alex said, “You know someone else is going to have to take that battle on; and perhaps they’ll see it and say I won’t be that or society will change by the time they get there.” (Alex 1515 – 1517) When asked about the unintended messages, Kayla responded,

It’s probably not a good one; it’s that we have to live our life in the closet. It’s one of if you want to get anywhere, you know that old adage, ‘if you want to get anywhere, you better not tell anybody.’ Again probably not the best message we want to send but... I hate it. Just not sure I’m the one that wants to die on the sword to change it. I’m by myself - we’re still a real minority. (Kayla 1063 – 1065, 1067 – 1068)

Adrian is not ready now but did not rule out the possibility,

I just don’t want to be the pioneer of this one. I got a lot more comfortable with the things I said and the conversations I had teaching as I was here a while and got established. I think as I’m an administrator longer and become more established, the same comfort level’s going to come. [I’m] just not interested right now while I’m still in the very early stages of building a reputation to burn bridges or to put anybody off. I think right now I’m just trying to be good at what I do; and then as I’m good at what I do, I can start having those kind of courageous conversations. It’s seen as more acceptable when I have those because I’m not trying to just, I don’t know, run a lesbian crusade here... I think I’m strong in so many ways; and I’m a total wuss in others. Because, if one of them before me probably had and it worked out well for them, I’d probably be a lot more like okay with being number two. (Adrian 1515 – 1517, 905 – 908)

All of the participants, even Brittany who was positioned most implicitly out with students and families, were missing even a single trailblazer who had come before them who had successfully lived implicitly or explicitly out with students and families. Many of the participants referenced Lily as the trailblazer for them with regard to living implicitly in their districts with district personnel; but no one had an example of a lesbian

school administrator who was successfully living implicitly or explicitly out with students and families.

Participants did not rule out the possibility of eventually living implicitly or even explicitly out about their sexuality with students and parents; they referred to this process as a journey similar to the progression they experienced during the process of coming out to family, friends and then district employees. When asked about a middle ground where she could live openly with students, Alex shared,

I'm sure there is; I'm not quite sure where it is. Because I could certainly draw the line with students where - here's the thing, they've never asked me a question about it, ever. I'd probably tell them it isn't an appropriate place to ask; so I don't know how I would be out to them without... But if let's say I start wearing my ring, they do an article and then I become publically out, well then doesn't that become open game for whomever to use it? See this is my own mental construct. I know that and I don't know how to get around this; but it feels right now. And in each of these things over time, I have had to come to a point where I accept or where I can work through that to go that next level. And right now, it feels like that if I am publically out to them then it becomes a publically acceptable thing to talk to me about; but not just in the commons but doesn't it then become a publically acceptable thing for the news media to talk about or to ask about? But a different approach could be I can wear the ring and be out and still not have to talk to my students about it? The students probably don't care - is there a happy medium? There probably is; but I'm not sure that I'm comfortable yet going there to know where that is. (Alex 490 – 505)

Sela believed the differences between the students' ability to accept her sexuality and the potential reaction from parents was generational:

But well that's because [kids] have more experiences [around sexuality], they're a different generation. I think the younger generation, they're a little more free about things and it's out in society. It's out - they have more friends who are out and open about it, they hear about it all the time. So they're going to build their beliefs a different way. Parents are my generation - we come from a whole different angle. So what they were bombarded with as they were growing up and the beliefs they built based upon that are completely different than what kids are coming in with. (Sela 959 – 972)

Based on these findings, the question becomes: Does living closeted when everyone is implicitly aware of your sexuality send a more detrimental message to students than living so closeted and compartmentalized that no one knows about your sexuality and therefore assumes you are heterosexual?

*Theme six: Don't Ask Don't Tell and the effects of the advice and experiences of others*

Fear was cited the primary reason for the seven participants who decided to remain closeted with students and parents. Their fears were founded in their own experiences of discrimination and hatred, internalized heterosexism and homophobia, the experiences shared by others, and the advice they received from family and other queer administrators. All participants shared the understanding that their sexuality was not something to be put in people's faces; instead they operated from a Don't Ask Don't Tell perspective. Participants came to this understanding in different ways. In some cases, it was just something that participants understood. Abby explains, "I always felt like early on, it was kind of understood that I wasn't to make a big deal about this" (Abby 702 – 703). When asked how she came to understand that Abby said,

Probably part myself, maybe part from watching [a veteran lesbian-identified colleague], maybe part from my comfort level - all of it. It just wasn't anything I was wanting to wear as a badge. It's a piece of who I am, it obviously influences a lot; but as a school administrator, I didn't think it was some central focus. (Abby 705 – 708)

Participants also received advice from other gay and lesbian school administrators: advice that perpetuated the fears and current mantra of not putting it "in people's faces." Alex shared the advice she received that continues to guide her decisions,

When I was first coming out one of the friends that I came out to put me in contact with a lesbian administrator who then put me in contact with a lesbian high school principal to be people who could sort of help guide me through this

process. And the advice I got, which I thought was very, very good advice, was to live your life but don't put it in people's faces. (Alex 170 – 174).

Maggie shared a similar expectation,

I think the unofficial rules are really just don't make trouble. It's like the military, don't make trouble, don't stick it in people's faces, don't... I think more so maybe with high schoolers because they're at that age where they're trying to figure themselves out; I think we're more so seen as a threat like, 'You validate my kid being gay. They wouldn't be gay except they know you are.' And you're like, 'Well.' (Maggie 1151 – 1156)

During our conversations, Alex shared her anxiety around living more openly with students and parents about her sexuality, "I still get nervous at times in this in the community, just because I have colleagues nearby that I've seen things happen to in communities you wouldn't think it would happen - one because of her homosexuality" (Alex 151 – 153). In this passage, Alex is referring to Maggie's experiences of overt discrimination in a neighboring district. In our conversations, both Alex and Kayla refer to Maggie's experience in her previous district where she believed she was terminated because of her sexual orientation. During her interviews, Kayla shared the sheer torture of watching her colleague and mentor persecuted by a community because of her sexual orientation. That experience changed Kayla, the way she presented herself in the district and the way she worked with students and families. Kayla's philosophy on not sharing her personal life with students and parents was influenced by Maggie's experience and based on this feeling:

These folks gave me a job based on who I am, my skill set. I can't protect everything, I can't protect everyone from everything and they can't protect me; but at the same time, these people have backed me even knowing who I am and the lifestyle that I lead, the least I can do is not, in my personal opinion, throw it in their face. (Kayla 429 – 434)

In her estimation, her former principal, who identified as lesbian, experienced the loss of her job because of her sexuality, specifically because of her openness:

I had a former principal who was very open for a while; and I am a firm believer and it's a personal opinion it cost her job. Because she and her partner rode to work together, they rode home together, they went to all the sporting events together, they were very open. She will even tell you now it probably did me in, it's not the smartest thing I've ever done. (Kayla 195 – 199)

Before this experience, Kayla was willing to share her sexual orientation with students and parents but the experience with her former principal caused her to reconsider her openness. Kayla reflects,

I watched the community go after her figuratively and literally; it's very painful to watch another person who lives the same life outside of school that you do, that is also gay, it was a witch hunt. And there was not a board meeting where somebody did not get up on citizen's comments and say, "We need to get rid of the gay principal at the high school. She's turning our kids gay. They got a club over there that's making the kids gay. She's got, there's..." It was very odd because they would say that and then there was never really any... The one letter that... They never really referenced me in citizen's comments; it was always directed at her. But they would say things like, "She's turning everybody over there gay. They're turning the kids gay. They're breeding lesbians. Gays and lesbians, they're breeding them over there." But again, and this was every board meeting; and our board meets twice a month, it was pathetic. So did I feel like needed to get away from that limelight, absolutely; because I still had a job. I needed a job - I had a house payment, we were planning on a baby at that point in time. In fact, the baby was on the way. (Kayla 356 – 370)

Kayla's witnessed this discrimination in the workplace firsthand; but for many participants, their fears were shaped by comments made by family and by friends' sharing secondhand experiences of discrimination which they internalized. When asked why she was so fearful, Abby said,

Part of it, probably growing up in [the southwest part of the state] hearing comments people made about gay and lesbian people. Hearing my mom make some comments about when AIDS first came out, she made awful comments about deserving it and that kind of stuff. I was like whoa; I just can't. I would say, "Do you realize what you're saying? (Abby 918 – 922)

Alex hears her mother's voice in the back of her head anytime she thinks about disclosing her sexuality, "I think that, I don't know, but there's part of me, in the back of my brain

that hears my mom saying be careful” (Alex 215 – 217). Sela’s internalized experiences are founded in her Baptist upbringing,

I think because overall in society, the other identities are not looked upon as negatively as the lesbian identity. And I think part of that is my religious background, my religious upbringing that gives me that negative piece to go with the lesbian identity. (Sela 1333 – 1336)

Participants internalized the experiences of others and those internalized fears and feelings kept them closeted; and they were aware that they maintained their closeted status because of their fears. For example, Sela explained,

I think there is a generation that keeps us in the closet. And a perpetuation of some stereotypes. And some deep seeded ‘isms’ that keeps us in the closet... I keep myself in the closet. I’ll speak for myself, yeah I think so. (Sela 1495 – 1496, 1498).

When asked to share what keeps her closeted, Sela said, “Fear of rejection - probably fear of some kind of retaliation, some kind of loss of job, loss of connection with family, loss of what you’ve built, where you are” (Sela 1500 – 1501). When asked if it was more her issue or a community issue, Adrian replied,

Probably me more than them, which is where it’s irritating when I really think about it. It’s like, why not just be freaking open about it, if I could just be more open about it then it’s just like lay it on the table; but it’s not who I am. I just don’t want everybody to know my business, knowing it and sharing it... It’s me. All of my answers keep coming back to this cover your ass sort of thing. I just seem to live under that mantra; and I hate that I do. I never would have, this has brought that; I just feel like people who want to, who go there that can handle it, they are appropriate; and it’s like I’m never going to be accused of trying to put something in somebody’s face or make them deal with a conversation or something that they can’t handle. I just don’t want to be that person - there [are] people in our community who are like that. And there’s a piece of me that appreciates that they are because they bring some awareness. And then there’s that other piece of me that, it drives me nuts that they are because then everybody lumps us together as being just crazy; and it’s all we talk about and care about. So I guess I just don’t want to be thrown in that category. (Adrian, 630 – 633, 635 – 645)

While most participants had not directly experienced any accusations related to their sexuality, they felt vulnerable to the idea that accusations that could be made about them and their sexuality. Adrian shared her thoughts on her decision to remain closeted with students and parents:

I think that I know this community pretty well having lived here my whole life. The military has the Don't Ask Don't Tell and I think we have a similar thing going on here. When Obama wants to give a speech and we have polarized views on the right and polarizing views on the left, we have both extremes here. As long as you can sit somewhere in the middle and keep both sides happy, you live a long happy life in this district. But I'm just, I get it; I mean, I'm not going to polarize myself on one side or the other because it just doesn't work here. It's not how it's played. I don't ever want a parent to question what happened when I had their daughter in here, one-on-one when I had discipline thing. (Adrian 215 – 223).

When asked why they were not more open with students and parents, participants cited the potential reaction from parents as the primary reason. The intense fear of parent reaction worked to reinforce the closet for participants even though all said that despite an overall lack of employment protections, they did not believe any of their districts would cite homosexuality as the reason for termination. Six of the eight participants stated that they thought they would be supported by the school district and their superiors if an accusation was made by a parent yet the most commonly cited reason for not explicitly disclosing their sexuality was potential negative parent reaction. When asked what prevented her from being more out to students, Abby responded,

Ridicule, rumors which I'm sure existed anyway. Career threats - if they really wanted to get to me they could have probably public humiliation just you know publically being challenged about it in a meeting, someone using it against me if they didn't like a decision I made, that kind of stuff from families. Students would have been to a particular degree; just knowing how cruel some middle school kids are was enough at that point. I think I had good relationships with kids but they probably would have been better if I would have been able to be more genuine about myself. And I knew that the whole time. (Abby 384 – 391)



Even Brittany who lived openly in her administrative position with parents cited the parent perception as a reason why she was not more explicitly open with students about her sexuality:

I would have loved to have been more honest; but I just wasn't sure they were ready for that and not knowing their parents' viewpoints on it. So I thought that was the most honest way that would not create waves. So yeah, it bothered me; but I just didn't want to open up that conversation for the kids and their families if they weren't at a place where they were ready to tackle that. (Brittany 236 – 240)

While the perception of the power parents held in the community kept many of the participants closeted in their interactions with students and parents, several participants stated that if they did not have to face the parental response, they would have been open about their sexual orientation with students. Abby shared,

I would be willing to be if I could have removed the parent piece. I would have had no, I would have no problem with kids - it was always the parent piece... I think with kids I could sit down and talk with them, be a person with them, be honest. And the fear was always attached with the parents. (Abby 958 – 960, 962 – 963).

When asked the same question, Sela's response was similar:

Oh wow, yeah kids are more understanding, more accepting - definitely more resilient. And what we think makes a huge difference to them and the impact on them is not always in a negative way. So I think if it were just kids, I would probably be a lot more willing to be more open. (Sela 1490 – 1493)

While parent reaction was used as the primary explanation for remaining closeted with students, there was a major disconnect between the perception of support from the district if issues regarding their sexuality were voiced and participants' willingness to explicitly disclose their sexuality. Participants voiced feelings of support at the district level but personally were unwilling to implicitly or explicitly state the obvious regarding their sexuality.

The decision to explicitly disclose our sexuality to anyone requires a high level of confidence. In schools, making the decision to reveal our sexuality to students or parents requires an immense amount of trust that sharing this sensitive information will not be used later in a hurtful way; we have to make a decision about the person's intentions and why they are inquiring. Sela shared her thoughts on the emotions associated with making that decision,

Very scary, it is. Because it's I feel like I have to be extremely trusting of those individuals; because if the tide turns and they get angry with you, are they going to then take that information they have and use that information against you? I listen for an acceptance in terms of the discussion we're having. And a lot of times, I listen for them to discuss whether they know somebody who is; because those are those subtle clues that they'll throw out there to you that, "I'm okay with this." And it's like they're reaching out to you. (Sela 192 – 194, 197 – 200)

Balancing the desire to make personal connections with students and families with the potential risks associated with making those authentic connections was evident throughout the interviews. The inner turmoil around deciding who was safe with good intentions and who may have intentions that could be potentially dangerous was exhausting and resulted in feelings of vulnerability. This vulnerability prevented most participants from feeling safe enough to implicitly or explicitly reveal anything about their personal relationships or sexual orientation with students or families.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As building administrators, all of the participants interacted with members of the school community, including district personnel, parents and students, throughout the school day and in the community. The choices they made in their professional experiences about where they positioned themselves on the out continuum with different audiences varied for participants, but there were similarities in the ways they answered

questions from parents and students and the factors that influenced their decisions. In this chapter, I identified six themes:

- 1.) The ways participants answer questions from parents;
- 2.) The ways participants answer questions from students;
- 3.) Treatment of partner in conversations and public encounters;
- 4.) Understanding of oppression;
- 5.) Role model responsibilities; and
- 6.) Don't Ask Don't Tell: The effects of the advice and experiences of others.

All of the participants received indirect inquiries from parents and students around marital status and children; participants answered truthfully or deflected the questions using humor. All of the participants except Brittany situated themselves as closeted with both parents and students. Brittany, who considered herself implicitly out with parents but not students, openly answered questions; other participants answered honestly but refrained from elaborating on their personal relationships and steered the conversation away from the topic quickly. Participants believed the purpose for these inquiries was one of three reasons: 1) personal connections; 2) a way to confirm what they suspected; or 3) a search for ammunition to be used later. None of the participants had direct inquiries from parents about their sexual orientation, but three of the high school administrators had direct inquiries from students. All three deflected the questions and steered the conversations back to the student and why they were asking. Overall, participants were not opposed to answering questions about their sexual orientation from students if the student's intentions were honorable and they had an established relationship with the student.

All of the participants in this study were partnered; the ways that participants chose to refer to their partners during interactions with parents and students varied. In conversations with both parents and students, most of the participants referred to their partners by name without a qualifier or with a plural pronoun. When participants were with their partners in public spaces and encountered a parent or student, participants decided not to make an introduction, introduced their partners by name without a title, or their partners drifted away from the conversation to avoid an introduction. Contrarily, Brittany referred to and introduced Kelly, her partner, by saying “this is my partner Kelly” if students were not present.

The most common reason for participants’ decisions to remain closeted with parents and students was their anticipation of a negative reaction from parents. Participants believed that parents had the power within their school districts to negatively impact participants’ careers because of homophobic and heterosexist attitudes. All participants stated that they would be more open about their sexual orientation with students if they could guarantee support from parents in the district. The fear that parents would react negatively to their lesbian identity if they shared with students was a result of internalized negative messages received from society and loved ones. Their fears were further reinforced by the stories shared by other queer educators in the community of hurtful and sometimes terrorizing experiences.

Despite their fears, all participants expressed a desire to assist students struggling with their sexual or minority identities. The fear paralyzed participants from presenting as implicitly or explicitly out with students even though all participants believed their students knew they identified as lesbian. Each participant shared that one of the ways

their lesbian identity as school administrators affected their work with students was a shared understanding of oppression with students who are minorities. Participants did not overtly challenge oppressive practices affecting students in schools but they worked behind the scenes on anti-bullying policies. All participants believed they could challenge negative stereotypes and present as positive lesbian role models for students without situating themselves as implicitly or explicitly out; despite this belief, many shared a desire to work directly and openly with students who were questioning their sexual identity. The implications of the findings in Chapters Four, Five and Six are explored in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Discussion of Results

The emotional journey of coming out both personally and professionally is a road without end. Participants in this study shared their triumphant and sometimes heartbreaking stories of implicitly and explicitly disclosing their sexuality to family, friends and members of the school community. Decisions to confide in others about their sexual orientation were made only after anguishing deliberation weighing the potential risks and rewards of disclosure and constantly reading the audience and listening for signals of acceptance. From personal experience, I know that the progression of disclosure (from hiding to sharing) is best understood as a continuum with many points along the way. At each stop on the journey, we decide how much of ourselves to reveal based on our feelings of comfort, safety, and the trust we have in others. Some of us are paralyzed by the negative messages or terrorizing experiences of discrimination and homophobia we receive. As a result, we hide our authentic selves from others we identify as unsupportive or potentially damaging. For some, the intense need to be our authentic selves as lesbians in some or all aspects of our lives overrides and outweighs the potential for devastation.

Participants in this research were also on the never-ending road to self-acceptance and living authentically in all aspects of their lives including their school communities. All eight participants positioned themselves as implicitly or explicitly out on the continuum with family and friends; they all situated themselves as implicitly out with district personnel in their school communities. For participants, the timeframe to disclose

their sexuality to district personnel varied and was directly affected by several common factors that ranged from internalized messages to formal protections found in law and board policy. The five participants who first accepted their lesbian identity within the last 15 years, whether they were administrators under the age of 36 or older administrators discovering their lesbian identity in their late thirties, acted more swiftly in revealing their sexual identity to district personnel. The three participants over the age of 45 who began identifying as lesbian in college or shortly thereafter, moved more slowly and deliberately in their progression of implicitly revealing their sexual orientation to district personnel. All three positioned themselves as implicitly out on the continuum with district personnel within the last 15 years. Over the last 15 - 20 years, society has seen queer issues at the forefront of public discussion on policy and civil rights. We have also witnessed a surge in the visibility of queer images and queer-identified people on television and in the media. There was a perception among all participants that there is a growing tolerance for queer issues with each generation of young people; this perception and the increase in visibility parallels the decisions of all participants to live implicitly and sometimes explicitly out in their personal and professional lives.

While participants are currently living implicitly out in their districts, their decisions to position themselves were made over time and influenced by seven factors:

- 1) Internalized messages;
- 2) Relationships;
- 3) Desire for their lesbian identity to be a secondary identity;
- 4) Consideration or presence of life changing experiences;
- 5) Generational themes;

- 6) The perception of informal support; and
- 7) Formal protections.

As both Tooms (2006) and Jones-Redmond (2007) found in their research, I also discovered that participants were directly influenced by the negative internalized messages from family, friends, and colleagues embedded in the advice given and the experiences shared which increased the fear of rejection, negative reactions, job loss and false accusations. To neutralize these fears and combat the derogatory stereotypes associated with being lesbian, participants were committed to relationship building with district personnel prior to revealing their sexual orientation. Participants used the time during the relationship building phase to listen for signals of acceptance and to establish other aspects of their personal identities such as woman, mother, or school administrator which they believed others viewed more positively. Similar to the analysis of Jones-Redmond (2007), I found it was important for all participants that their lesbian identity be secondary to other identities. Participants also invested a great deal of thought and energy into establishing a positive reputation in their districts of being seen as administrators that were student-centered and focused on the overall well-being of the district, not as lesbian school administrators pushing a queer agenda.

As time passed, participants felt that withholding information about their sexual orientation created barriers in building professional relationships with district personnel. After contrasting the risks of revealing their sexual orientation with the rewards of developing deeper relationships and living more authentically in the workplace, many participants chose to implicitly disclose their sexual orientation. For other participants, the decision to share information about their sexual orientation in professional



relationships was precipitated by a change in life circumstances such as the birth or adoption of a child, a civil union, or a life-threatening illness. Each of these changes presented participants with a choice: increase the deceitfulness in their presentation of self and their relationships because of the increase in partners' visibility or reveal their sexuality to district personnel. In both instances, participants typically shared this information by referring to their relationships or partners by name in conversation; most did not directly say they were lesbian to the audience.

Successful relationships and reputation building coupled with the perception of society's increased acceptance of lesbian relationships impacted the participants' comfort in sharing their sexual orientation in their school communities with district personnel. Through this research, I also found that the perception of informal supports and the presence of formal protections also influenced participants' decisions to position themselves as implicitly out of the continuum with colleagues. During our conversations, participants shared that a district climate that honored diversity by addressing educational and personnel issues through a lens of social justice contributed to their comfort living implicitly out with district personnel. The support of straight allies and networking with other queer administrators in their districts was also a factor in the participants' choices to position themselves implicitly out with district personnel.

In two ways, formal protections were viewed by participants as symbolic gestures made by districts. The decisions by boards of education to include sexual orientation in non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies contributed to the feeling that their districts' climates were supportive of issues of diversity including sexual orientation. Many participants believed that even without this formal protection, they would be

supported if there was an issue regarding their sexuality. But while participants appreciated when districts included sexual orientation in their anti-discrimination policy, some questioned the effectiveness of this protection without federal, state or local laws to protect them, which was also a concern echoed in Jones-Redmond's (2007) work. Other participants hypothesized that if their district supervisors were going to terminate them because of their sexuality, such supervisors would scrutinize their performance in an attempt to identify other justifications in lieu of their sexual orientation.

Throughout their school days as building administrators, participants interacted with all members of the school community including students and parents. While participants situated themselves as implicitly out with district personnel, seven of the eight participants positioned themselves as closeted with students and their parents. All participants believed their sexual orientation was known by students and their parents but they declined to implicitly or explicitly disclose their sexuality to them. In examining their decisions to remain closeted with students and their parents, I found six common themes:

- 1) The ways participants answer questions from parents;
- 2) The ways participants answer questions from students;
- 3) Treatment of partner in conversations and public encounters;
- 4) Understanding of oppression;
- 5) Role model responsibilities; and
- 6) Don't Ask Don't Tell: The effects of the advice and experiences of others.

All of the participants were indirectly asked by student and parents about their sexuality through questions about their marital status and children; each one answered the

questions honestly or deflected with humor. Seven of the eight participants situated themselves as closeted with students and parents; one participant considered herself implicitly out with parents and talked openly about her relationship and family. Participants answered questions as truthfully as possible without elaborating on the nature of their relationships and steered the conversation away quickly; when participants had children, they displayed their pictures and made references to them in conversations but did not share that the other parent was their lesbian partner. For participants, the intent of the inquiries was threefold: 1) to make personal connections; 2) a way to confirm what they already suspected; and 3) a search for ammunition to be used later.

While participants had indirect inquiries from students about their personal lives, only three participants had direct inquiries about their sexuality from students; all three were high school administrators and stated inquiries were infrequent ranging from only one occurrence to a couple of times a year. One of the participants confirmed her sexual orientation to an inquiring student; the other two participants confirmed their sexuality through non-verbal behavior but moved the conversation back to the student. As a group, the participants were not opposed to sharing information about their sexual orientation with students if they had an established relationship with the student.

In this study, all eight of the participants were partnered. When engaged in conversations about personal experiences with students and their parents, participants typically referred to their partners by name or used a plural pronoun. Participants never gave their partners the title of partner during these face-to-face conversations or when they encountered students and their parents in the community. When participants and their partners incidentally met students or parents in public spaces, participants chose to

handle the encounter in one of three ways: 1) refrained from making introductions; 2) introduced their partner by name without a qualifier; or 3) their partner drifted away to avoid the interaction.

Participants shared feelings of guilt because they were being dishonest or evasive and held a desire to be more open about their relationships, but all cited the potential of negative reactions from parents as the primary reason they remained closeted. While most had never had negative interactions with parents regarding their sexual orientation, participants believed parents with heterosexist or homophobic beliefs possessed the power within school districts to negatively affect or end their careers. Even though they had frequent contact with parents, they had limited contact with individual parents; typically they did not have enough time to use the strategy of building relationships and listening for signs of acceptance to determine if disclosing their sexuality was safe as they did with district personnel. While they believed students and their parents were aware of their lesbian identity, the fear of parent reaction and their potential to use their power to affect their careers was enough to keep participants closeted. All of the participants stated that if they could guarantee a positive or even ambivalent reaction from parents, they would position themselves as implicitly out with their students. However, without that assurance, the risk was too great. Despite the positive experiences shared by queer educators inside and outside of their districts who situate themselves as out with students and their parents, the stories of negative and sometimes terrorizing experiences with parents from other queer educators in the community reinforced their decisions to remain closeted.

Regardless of the age of the students with which they were working, all participants expressed a desire help students struggling with their sexual identity. Their fear of parent reaction and the uncertainty of district support paralyzed participants from reaching out to struggling students directly. Participants' fear of being labeled as having a lesbian agenda prevented them from overtly challenging heterosexist practices in schools affecting both queer-identified students and district personnel. Instead, participants chose to use their positions of relative power to work behind the scenes on policy initiatives addressing anti-bullying; these policies often address sexual orientation and are used as an umbrella for other social justice issues. All participants believed that while they positioned themselves as closeted with students and their parents, their sexual orientation was known by students and their families. Participants felt they could indirectly challenge the negative stereotypes associated with being lesbian by maintaining a positive reputation in the school community with implicitly or explicitly revealing their sexuality. Participants did not rule out the possibility of positioning themselves as implicitly or explicitly out with students but they did not want to be the trailblazer, preferring for someone to have success before testing the waters themselves.

### Implications for Practice

The findings in this study have broader implications for school practice today. Although they are slowly changing, schools continue to be heterosexist institutions that provide very limited space for queer issues and even less for queer-identified people; yet somehow, I feel empowered. In this research, I have given eight lesbian-identified school administrators a voice to articulate through their stories and reflections how districts can support a school climate that cherishes all members of their school community who

identify as queer, including their school administrators. Despite their unique experiences and perspectives, participants shared common beliefs about the ways they are supported, how districts could protect them from discrimination, and why this support and protection is necessary. Based on the information I collected during our conversations, I have developed suggestions for practice.

### *Building Informal Support Networks*

Participants in this study have progressed from closeted to positioning themselves as implicitly out with district personnel. Their progression has paralleled the changes in attitudes regarding civil rights for people who identify as queer in the United States over the last fifteen years. Previously, gay and lesbian school administrators were likely to remain closeted in all facets of the school community. Participants referenced supportive supervisors and understanding colleagues as reasons for their willingness to reveal their sexual orientation in their districts. Participants spent time building relationships with their colleagues and listening for signals of support and acceptance; their colleagues nurtured their feelings of acceptance and safety informally through conversations and by supporting initiatives that protected them. Supervisors showed their support by protecting them from institutional discrimination and honoring their families by granting them the courtesies given to heterosexual couples such as bereavement and adoption leaves. Therefore, building informal support networks in school districts comprised of other queer-identified educators and straight allies would assist in supporting a district climate treasured by participants and address the absence of a sense of community described by some participants.

### *Curricular Initiatives*

While school districts can do little to eliminate heterosexist messages and attitudes previously internalized, they can work to eradicate the indoctrination of these heterosexist and homophobic messages in schools. Some of the ways schools currently do this include introducing and implementing social justice and diversity initiatives that include sexual orientation. Furthermore, districts have the responsibility to select curricula that have representations of queer-identified people that explores the history and future of queer issues, providing queer-identified students with images to which they can relate, thus giving heterosexual students an alternate lens through which to view issues of sexuality. We must begin introducing queer images in schools as a step in the direction of normalizing sexual orientations other than heterosexuality for children that are struggling with their sexual identity and others that will eventually become the parents we currently fear.

### *Professional Development Around Sexual Identity*

Other ways district can begin combating heterosexist messages in schools is by focusing professional development on exploring issues of privilege and oppression specifically around sexual orientation. Many times, districts focus on issues of diversity but really they are focusing only on issues of race; there are ways to embed issues of sexual orientation into professional development initiatives currently focused on race. During their interviews, several participants described a district-wide staff development initiative focused on racism but during this process they explored other issues of oppression. This forum gave participants a safe place to share their sexual orientation with colleagues and an opportunity for their colleagues to begin the journey of understanding how privilege and oppression affect each of us. System-wide professional

development initiatives begin the process of building a district climate that honors diversity by forcing district personnel to explore issues of prejudice and bias which giving them a common language to use to begin having courageous conversations.

### *Formal Protections*

For participants to begin feeling safe enough to have open dialogue about their sexual orientation with students and their parents, districts must provide rock-solid protections for sexual orientation in their non-discrimination, anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies and follow-through by publicly supporting queer-identified educators. The participants in this study, similar to the participants in Jones-Redmond's (2007) research, were skeptical about the validity and predictability of anti-discrimination measures in board policies because these policies were not supported by federal, state or local laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. These formal protections are necessary to create a real sense of safety. The dialogue between school administrators who identify as queer and students regardless of their sexual orientation is vital to the creation of queer space in schools, thereby changing attitudes about sexuality. At this time there is no apparent research to indicate the true impact an implicitly or explicitly out school administrator could have on both students secure in their identity and those questioning. Likewise, there is no apparent research that could expose the damage we cause by the unintended messages conveyed to queer-identified and questioning students when as adults our sexuality is known but we refuse to acknowledge it directly because of the potential risk of personal and professional devastation. What is clear in the research and evident in the generational changes in the attitudes of young people is that the more exposure the public has to out and proud queer-identified



professionals, the more open society becomes to equal rights for people that identify as queer.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The participants in this study are all European American who identify as lesbian school administrators and have had the majority of their educational experience in suburban schools. I was unable to locate any other studies in the field of educational research focused so specifically on lesbians from one racial group. Most of the research available focuses on heterogeneous groups of school administrators that identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual; school administrators identifying as transgender or transsexual are absent from the literature. The experiences of queer-identified school administrators who are racial minorities are under-represented in the research; their voices are important to the growing field of research on queer-identified school administrators and need to be heard.

In this research, all of the participants positioned themselves as implicitly or explicitly out with district personnel and primarily closeted with students and their families. Other queer educators' stories of discrimination had substantial negative effects on participants' decisions to share their sexuality with students and their parents; and participants expressed a desire to be more open with students and their parents about personal relationships if they knew that another lesbian administrator was implicitly or explicitly with students and their parents successfully. There are queer-identified school administrators who have positioned themselves as implicitly or explicitly out with students and their parents; their stories need to be told.

Participants referenced the potential for negative reactions from parents and their power to detrimentally affect their career as a primary reason they remained closeted with students and their families. Further research on the attitudes of parents working with queer-identified school administrators is needed. Additionally, more research is needed to explore the potential unintended messages internalized by both queer-identified and heterosexual students when queer-identified administrators situate themselves as closeted with students in a school community where their sexual orientation is known. Finally, the belief that participants have a greater understanding of how oppression affects students who carry a minority status was stated by all in this study, yet for most participants, their own oppressive experiences and privilege were unnamed and unexplored. More research is needed around the idea of how being a school administrator considered a sexual minority affects work with students from sexual, racial and other minority groups.

### Personal Implications

I chose a career in education as a young adult after thoughtful deliberation; eventually the most influential consideration in my decision was the opportunity to interact with and positively affect the lives of students and their families. Interestingly, in my early twenties, while I was contemplating education as a profession, I was for the first time publically disclosing my sexuality to family and friends. At the time, I never gave much thought to how my personal and professional worlds would collide. It was a simple time: I was going to be a teacher and I happened to be a lesbian. It never occurred to me that my lesbian identity might negatively affect my career, the way I felt at work or how I would choose to interact with my colleagues, students or their families.

I spent time in the classroom as a special education teacher working daily with students who had long-term suspensions from school for dangerous or disruptive behavior. During this time, I believe my lesbian identity was outwardly obvious to my colleagues, students and their families because my personal style was stereotypically “butch” and I proudly displayed a Human Rights sticker on my Jeep. Looking back, I specifically remember a conversation with a female student. She was sharing that she had a girlfriend and innocently asked about mine. I was horrified; the blood quickly rushed to my face and I wanted to run. No one had told me not to disclose my lesbian identity to students. Yet, my automatic reaction was to deflect the question and change the subject as fast as I could. In a matter of seconds, I went from feeling the ease of many conversations with this student to a vigilant, anxiousness about the possibility of other questions emerging about my lesbian identity. This anxiety was not confined to that conversation but bled into all of the other interactions we had during the school year. While this experience is not the only encounter I have had with a student inquiring about my sexual identity, it was the first time I realized that my personal and professional worlds would in fact collide and it would happen unexpectedly.

I could have never prepared myself for the feelings that surface and the way my body reacts any time a student inquires directly or indirectly about my lesbian identity or my partner. My heart races, my face is immediately hot and red, and I gasp for air so loudly that it must be heard across the room. My first instinct is to run, to escape. This is not realistic so instead I avoid, I deflect or I answer with partial truths. I can never quite bring myself to answer honestly, to confirm what they already know.

Still, I boldly send out signals through my choices that scream, “I am a lesbian! I have a partner!” As a teacher, the messages were conveyed through my stereotypical behavior and by displaying a bumper sticker associated with human rights, primarily queer rights on my vehicle. While as a principal I have “softened” my appearance and lost the bumper sticker, I replaced them with other signals. I have pictures of my partner and I standing together on a beach with our arms around each other placed prominently on my desk; while the pictures face me, they are very visible to students and their families. My partner attends school events and I encourage her to interact with students.

As I reflect on how this research impacted me personally, questions come to mind. So what do I expect? I send them all of these messages about my lesbian identity and relationship, why wouldn’t they ask? Why shouldn’t they ask? If I am so willing to encourage their curiosity, subconsciously indirectly seeking their acceptance through these signals, why am I so emotionally paralyzed when it comes to answering their questions or acknowledging their attempts to show support by engaging in the conversation?

As a lesbian school principal, that works in a public school and interacts daily with staff, students and families while managing my lesbian identity, my experiences were virtually absent in the research literature. Several years into my doctoral program, after exploring various potential research topics, I decided to focus on research that personally affected me. I could have never imagined the range of emotions this process would elicit from pain to joy, fear to empowerment. I brought myself to this research – my own ideas about what it means to be a lesbian, my own experiences with blatant discrimination and heterosexism, and my own battle with internalized oppression. I know

how quickly the pit in my stomach arrives when a student asks me says something as simple as “Can I ask you a question Ms. Kelly?” But I also bring the acceptance of a district that continues to support and embrace me, the understanding of a staff that accepts me as a lesbian and my partner as they would any other spouse, and the protection of an anti-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation along with the naivety that accompanies these positive experiences.

This research changed me. A year ago I would have avoided inferences or questions about my lesbian identity from students and their families, lowering my head and deflecting the questions, begging to change the subject. Today I hold my head higher, not looking for an opportunity to have the conversation but not avoiding it either. Instead of viewing these exchanges as potential career-threatening disasters, I look at them as opportunities to provide a frame of reference for questioning students for what it looks like to be a strong, successful principal, their principal, who identifies as a lesbian. I proceed apprehensively but with an awareness that I am not alone in this struggle – this battle between the silencing force of internalized oppression within and the feelings of responsibility as a queer school administrator to educate and provide an example to my school community about what it means to be queer.

Less than a year ago, I apprehensively began the process identifying and interviewing participants. I wondered, “What lesbian school administrator would have any interest in sharing her story with me? Who would willingly give hours of their time to talk to me about what it’s like to be a lesbian in a position of leadership within a school?” I was quickly surprised to find that not only were there lesbian school administrators out

there that were eager to participate, they were excited to have a voice that they felt has otherwise been ignored and often internally and externally silenced.

I met with them in their offices, at their homes, in coffee shops and even at the library, but no matter where we met, the rapport and connection was instant. We talked for hours on tape, but some of our best conversations took place long after the recording ended. These conversations cultivated a feeling of closeness that can only be explained by the commonness of our feelings and experiences. Their stories were unbelievable but all too real for me. I was mesmerized by what they shared: my own experiences mirrored in theirs. While each had some narratives of rejection and isolation, many had more stories of acceptance and community. Although stronger in number, their positive stories were overshadowed by a few examples of discrimination and hatred. As I listened, it was so difficult for me to refrain from illuminating the discrepancy, to stop myself from challenging their mental constructs keeping them in the closet with students and their families. But I kept myself in the same closet for the same reasons with the same excuses for why I could not free myself of the chains of internalized oppression.

Not too long ago I bumped into Lily, one of my participants, at a restaurant in our neighborhood while I was having dinner with my partner. She embraced me warmly with a hug, and we exchanged pleasantries and introductions. As we were standing there, she said to my partner and her companion, “I was one of Kelly’s subjects in her research.” Then turning to me with an almost apologetic look, she admitted, “You know, I never have read those transcripts that you gave me.” Before giving it any thought, I looked in her eyes and said, “I know. I understand. You will read them when you’re ready.” It was confirmation of what I already knew: For Lily, the process of telling her story and

reliving the experiences in her past while liberating was at times extremely painful, but reading her own words in print seemed unbearable.

I know this experience changed me, and I believe it changed my participants. As they spoke and reflected on their experiences, I heard them challenge themselves, questioning their thinking. What they firmly believed minutes before about their decisions to disclose, they began to question and critically explore through our conversations. During our time together, they would share stories about interactions with others that occurred between interviews and how they thought about or sometimes behaved differently because of something we discussed in the previous meetings. There is a strength that comes from telling your story, an empowerment that comes from naming something that has never been named. As we spoke, an awareness of the fact that internalized oppression clouds so many of the decisions they make with regard to living openly with students and their families. Even after our time together, I believe each one took this awareness with them back into their lives. They may not have changed the way they respond to inquiries from students and families, but they are thinking about those inquiries and their reactions differently. These subtle but powerful messages also crept into my consciousness.

Throughout, participants shared their gratitude for my willingness to tackle this research – anxious for the results and hopeful that I would find that they each worried for nothing, that they are safe to be who they are personally in their professions. I was honored and humbled by their trust to share some of the most intimate details of their lives. When I began this journey, I was not certain where it would end, but what I found along the way was a group of courageous lesbian school administrators anxious to take

that leap, to live implicitly out with students and their families, if they could only find one other person willing to take that leap with them. While I cannot guarantee their safety, there are always risks associated with making that jump, I can say that I found far more reasons to be encouraged, even empowered to share my life with students and their families than I found to remain closeted.



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# Appendix A: Participant Demographical Information

Participants	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Partner	Experience (Years)	Highest Level of Education
Alex	41	White	Female	Lesbian	Annette 5 Years	Teacher (9); Assistant Principal (5); Principal (5)	PhD
Lily	56	White	Female	Lesbian	Kathryn 18 Years	Teacher (6); Federal Programs (2); Principal (8); Assistant Superintendent (20)	PhD
Kayla	35	White	Female	Lesbian	8 Years	Teacher (6); Assistant Principal (8)	Master's
Abby	45	White	Female	Lesbian	6 Years	Teacher (10); Assistant Principal (4); Principal (7); Assistant Superintendent (1)	EdD
Brittany	33	White	Female	Lesbian	Kelly 10 Years	Teacher (5); Assistant Principal (5)	Master's
Sela	48	White	Female	Lesbian	Sandra 13 Years	Teacher (10); Assistant Principal (16)	EdS
Adrian	31	White	Female	Lesbian	Chris 11 Years	Teacher (10); Assistant Principal (1)	Master's
Maggie	46	White	Female	Lesbian	7 Months	Teacher (6); Assistant Principal (4); Principal (10)	PhD

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Interview One: Identities in School – School Administrator and Lesbian

1. Why did you become a school administrator?
2. What path did you take to become a school administrator? (education and other positions)
3. How would you describe your own leadership style?
4. Do you spend time outside of school with other administrators or staff? What does this look like?
5. When did you first realize that you were a lesbian?
6. Can you describe when and how you first came out?
7. Sometimes there are places where we are more out in different ways than others this is sometimes referred to as the “out” continuum; can you talk about your place on the “out” continuum in the community?
8. Can you talk about your place on the “out” continuum with your family?
9. Can you talk about your place on the “out” continuum at school?
10. What is the relationship between the way you feel you are perceived by others and your own sense of sexual identity? OR Are you aware of dressing, self-positioning, personal style (grooming), or otherwise behaving in ways that others might “mark” as lesbian? How does this play out in your experiences at school?
11. Are you currently partnered or have you been partnered during your tenure as a school administrator? Ring or no ring? Pictures or no pictures? References to partner in conversations?
12. Does your partner attend school functions? If so, how is she introduced to colleagues, staff, students and families?
13. Family pictures and other artifacts are commonly displayed by school administrators’ offices, are their ways in which your physical space is organized that would signal to others that you are a lesbian?
14. What factors impact your decisions about displaying personal artifacts?
15. Are there items that you chose not to display?

16. In your experience, how do these different identities (school administrator and lesbian) interact or influence each other?
17. Is what we are talking about now something you talk about with anyone else?
18. How self-conscious are you about your negotiation of these roles and identities? Are you aware of ways in which your “negotiating style” has changed over time?
19. Is there anything about your experiences as a lesbian or as a school administrator you would like to add that we didn’t cover in this part of our conversation?

#### Interview Two: Details of Experience

1. From the time you wake up until you go to sleep, what does a typical day look like for you as a school administrator?
2. What is it like to be a school administrator who identifies as lesbian?
3. Describe the ways your sexual orientation impacts your professional relationships with other administrators. Do you socialize with other school administrators? If so, do they bring their partners? Do you?
4. Describe the ways your sexual orientation impacts your professional relationships with staff.
5. Describe the ways your sexual orientation impacts your relationships with students.
6. Describe the ways your sexual orientation impacts your relationships with families.
7. Describe how your sexual orientation informs and/or affects the experiences you have had in your current position working with students.
8. How do you answer or otherwise manage both direct and indirect (explicit or implicit references) questions about your sexuality?
9. How have you seen lesbian experiences excluded or included in the day to day operations of a school?
10. Describe how your sexuality informs and/or affects the experiences you have had in your current position working with families.
11. How do you answer or otherwise manage both direct and indirect questions about your sexuality?

12. How does your sexuality affect your experiences with the community in general, beyond students and families?
13. What supports and/or impedes your development of a positive lesbian identity as a school administrator?
14. Describe some of the stresses of coming out at school?
15. Describe some of the successes of coming out at school?
16. What are some of the hidden rules you are expected to follow as a lesbian school administrator?
17. What are some of the ways you create space (physically and conversationally) for your personal life at school?
18. How does the constant coming out affect you emotionally and physically?
19. Is there anything about your day to day experiences as a lesbian school administrator that you would like to add that we didn't cover in this part of our conversation?

#### Interview Three: Reflection on Meaning

1. What does it mean to you to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?
2. What strengths does identifying as lesbian give you when working with students in your capacity as a school administrator?
3. What strengths does identifying as lesbian give you when working with families in your capacity as a school administrator?
4. What strengths does identifying as lesbian give you when working with staff or colleagues in your capacity as a school administrator?
5. What challenges does identifying as a lesbian present when working with students in your capacity as a school administrator?
6. What challenges does identifying as a lesbian present when working with families in your capacity as a school administrator?
7. What challenges does identifying as a lesbian present when working with staff and colleagues in your capacity as a school administrator?
8. How do you receive positives or affirmations related to your sexuality?



9. What are the positives about being a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?
10. What are the drawbacks of being a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?
11. In what ways has coming out at school empowered you?
12. In what ways has coming out at school constrained you?
13. Do you attend public events that are predominantly queer?
14. Is there anything about what it means to you to be a lesbian school administrator that you would like to add that we haven't talked about today or in previous interviews?

## Appendix C: A Sample of Participant Profiles / Reduced, Punctuated Narratives

### Participant Two (Lily)

#### Interview One

KG: Why did you become a school administrator?

Lily: I discovered the significance of administration when I was in a staff development job after I taught for a while. I traveled from building to building; and I could tell the difference of the influence of the principal in each of the buildings that I traveled in. And I thought wow, I never thought I would be interested in administration, that really intrigues me. So I went back to school and got certified.

KG: Were those good experiences people were having or just bad experiences?

Lily: Actually I didn't know. What I knew was at the time I was doing this staff development piece, this is a long time ago and it had to do with me; and so quite by accident, I would go around and visit with people and then I would take pictures of things that seemed to me to be significant that they were doing. The teachers were shocked at the things I would take pictures of because they didn't see them as significant. So all the sudden I got this sense of how much feedback the teachers didn't get. And also just in terms of the flexibility of trying to do this job; and what worked in different buildings, the receptiveness of the teachers and the concern of the teachers because of the principal. There was something that just began to attract me to the idea that I might be able to influence the climate and the direction of a building. I was at that time, I was finishing my master's in curriculum; so immediately upon finishing it, I re-enrolled. I ended up doing a Research Design Masters Program in Curriculum and Instruction Administration. [School administration] had never crossed my mind, probably because I was lesbian and I knew it then. I identified as lesbian then; in fact, it was in an era when I was very nervous about that and there were circumstances in Lawrence around just the whole feminism movement.

KG: You think that impacted why you weren't thinking about administration?

Lily: I was scared.

KG: Prior to coming into the first administrative position?

Lily: When I entered college, I was a student [of] theater voice and I lived in [a Midwestern college town]. There was what was called a free school movement which was parent run alternatives to public schools. I got

hooked up as a volunteer and became part of the faculty as a volunteer in this free school. I was fascinated by the collaboration with kids and parents. I decided I would enter the School of Education; and I did so with a bit of a chip on my shoulder because it was so traditional for women to do that. When I graduated, I got hired; and I was interested in staying in [the town I was in]. So I worked for one year at a school with about four teachers; and then I moved to an open space school. I was drawn to education because of the creative aspects. So again, this was pre-standards. I picked elementary [education] because I actually didn't want to specialize in a content area. I got immediately into book writing; one of my team teachers and I wrote books. You know, we saw ourselves as teachers. He was also gay; and maybe we were those typical type A's, working hard to prove whatever anybody thought otherwise. I ended up leaving the classroom to do this curriculum development work in media. And at that time, I simply needed to get all the check boxes for administrative certification. It wasn't another degree, it was hours on top of my master's. I was not in [this state]. When I moved [here], I went to the state department and I sat with them while they interpreted my transcript because I went on the job market then as an administrator. When I came to [this city], I was applying for principal. I hadn't yet even turned thirty and I got hired by [the previous school district] because I could write grants. I had the staff development job as a grant job; and I was applying for principalship. They decided I was too young, they told me that; but they wanted to hire me anyway. So the exit interview after the day's worth of interviews, they asked if I thought I could write grants and would I like to be the Director of State and Federal Programs, which was a stepping stone position that they used to bring people into central office before they became principals which gave me the workings of the central office, lots of board of education experience. Two years later there were circumstances in the district that kind of required a fruit basket upset; and so I left the central office and became an elementary principal. Four years later, there was another fruit basket upset and I became a middle school principal. So I had ten years of that experience in [my previous district] after which I went to [my current district] as Assistant [Superintendent].

KG: Would describe your leadership style, specifically when you were working as a building administrator?

Lily: I had, and I think it's still true, been influenced by Sir Giovanni; and he talks about building, banking, bonding and bartering. But there's something about spiritual leadership, situational leadership, paying attention to the people you are trying to lead, taking care of them. So doing the relationship building, doing the bonding around a common vision, theme and mission, banking chips so to speak with respect to yes I can listen, yes I can hear, I can agree with this part but maybe not this part. I mean over time the concept that there's a give and take to these kinds of

things. My elementary principalship, I got assigned to because there was a school consolidation and I was the person who was not coming from either school that was being consolidated. There was a tug of war over whose principal was going to become the principal; so the district did a swap. I came in, not only with no relationships and no allegiance from anybody, but also not the person that anybody wanted. I hadn't a clue what I was doing; but I knew we had to move furniture and I knew we had to arrange classrooms. I mean I took care of housekeeping stuff; because in the spring of that year, that was the only thing anybody could do because they were still teaching. I really had the sense there was something early in the literature that I had latched onto which was, "the greatest liberation is in the smallest focus." So I really had a sense about kids being successful and I kept anchoring to that. So everything I did was around creating a safe and welcoming environment and kids being successful. I really believed in the confidence building; and so what I discovered, that teachers needed that as much as kids and there were teachers in that building that were very talented and didn't think so. I really was on a mission to let them be illuminated; but also to take advantage of their strengths. Then I had to do middle school; and the middle school was a hell hole. I was willing to be creative and inventive, I was too young to know the risks or I had a strong sense that it didn't have to be the way it was. I (inaud) the failures; I had strong sense that because the teachers didn't know it could be different, we were passing that on to the kids. It's kind of a mutual parallel path thing; in the process of being there, I discovered the efficacy theory and Jeff (inaud) which was all about confidence and all about the damage that social messages do to kids of color. So that became an important tool; and to this day, I would say it's the best job I ever had. I never worked harder, was never happier with being exhausted over that kind of work, still feel very fondly about that school and about [my previous school district]. The circumstances of the district at the time were such that I just thought it was time to leave - that was 20 years ago.

KG: Did you spend outside time outside of school with other administrators in your building on a personal level?

Lily: No. I compartmentalized my life. I worked hard and I played hard. I preferred to be in predominantly lesbian company when I was not at work; and I did not have the capacity to integrate those two worlds.

KG: Were you out at work?

Lily: No.

KG: When did you first realize that you were a lesbian?

Lily: I was 18. I was at church camp; and they had imported a bunch of gay and lesbian young adults to talk about alternative lifestyles. This was in 1971; and I sat in those groups and I thought why do I know the answers to all these questions? So I thought, well I'm at church camp let's experiment. So two months later, I went to college and I went to college deciding that I was lesbian - immediately hooked up with this same group of people. Then kind of freaked out about several months later and decided I would do the bisexual route for a while. That might have lasted for, I don't know, a year or two.

KG: Did you come out to your family?

Lily: I did, because again related to the church, I had been a youth leader so I had a seat on some big church committees. And at the time, there was interest in becoming more and more educated about gays and lesbians. So there was an event; and I was going to be a resource person for the event. I thought I ought to tell my parents before that happened - so I did. I was wrong about how they were going to react; they both reacted differently but I had predicted the reversed reaction in each of them. I thought my dad would be fine and my mom wouldn't; and it was the opposite. It kind of never got talked about again except they always knew who I was living with. They always knew who I was hanging out with. And my mother, let's see my mom died when I was 27 or 28, and I remember I wanted her to know that I was happy and she was really fine with the whole thing. Then I thought my dad was and he used to even go on vacations with me and other people; but he had a setback later and it's been a process.

KG: Is he still struggling?

Lily: No I don't think so. Well let me just say that we got to a point where we had to make agreements if we were going to stay in a relationship there were some things we could not discuss.

KG: Do you have siblings?

Lily: I have a sister.

KG: Is she part of your life?

Lily: She's okay with me; but I think I'm confusing to her. I think I confuse her; in times when I have had relationships end and begin. On one hand, I mean for a long time I would not confirm anything for her because I did not want her caught in the circumstance; I was very protective of somebody asking her and it's better if she doesn't know. When she had children, I think she was nervous for her children. I remember once vacationing at her house; and she was really nervous about people seeing

us and what would they think, like we've got L written on us or something. But I think as her kids became adults that and now my niece interviewed me last year as a lesbian parent for one of her MSW classes so we're over and done with this.

KG: Typically when you face parents who have difficulty with their children's lifestyle they site religion.

Lily: I have books on how not to be a homosexual.

KG: So they went that direction?

Lily: Yes, interestingly not until my father remarried. I made a strategic error - I asked my dad if he had told his fiancé that I was lesbian; and he said no that's between you and her. Well, I had no relationship with her when they first got married; so I didn't say anything and after a couple of years I said to him, "Dad this is really not working, you tell her or I'm telling her because half my life is invisible." (inaud) He said, "Okay, I'll tell her." And then I got this letter on a dark and dreary Saturday; and they sat down and they prayed. I have two step sisters that are very conservative, home schooling type (inaud); so it was you know real identity crisis for the family. How to love the sinner and not the sin.

KG: Are you partnered now?

Lily: I am.

KG: And you have children?

Lily: I do.

KG: Are they a part of your partner's life and your children's life?

Lily: Yes, although my partner has been an Episcopal priest and that pushed another button for them for women ordained women. You know my dad is responsible for himself; I thought he revealed values that I had not ever known in my developing years when he remarried.

KG: As a teacher were you out?

Lily: No. Well, I was not out to parents and kids. I was out to my gay team teacher and one of the other team teachers knew I was lesbian.

KG: Were you out to your boss?

Lily: At the parent run school, I was probably out there. Yes, I was out there. When I was at a public school which happened to be an open space school so there was lots of teaming required, I was not out to parents and kids. I had two teammates who knew I was a lesbian, one of them was gay. When I became a staff developer, I think my boss knew I was lesbian. At that point in time, I was doing a lot music and band and folk kinds of stuff. When I came to [this city], one of my colleagues, a straight man immediately hit on me and concluded with my rebuffing it was because I was lesbian. I came out to him because he was very willing to pose as a heterosexual man hanging out with me, as a protective move for me; and I was willing to let him because I was scared. When I became a principal, I don't recall that I was out to anybody at the elementary school. At the middle school, before I left there I was out to a couple of people; but they were other lesbians. Now at the middle school, I don't really think I was fooling anybody; but we were all about the business of turning that place around so it was not a subject of conversation. I don't really think people cared. I will say, I had one experience as an elementary principal, a parent walked in who worked at [a university] and she said, "There is a young man in my husband's department and I'd be happy to fix the two of you up, unless you don't date men." At which point I was like uhlalalala, why would she think that? Why would she say that to me? Even though, I thought it was a very kind thing later; at the time, I was unprepared. So I just was deflecting. Now there were other lesbians that I got connected to while I was in [my previous district]; and in the end, the superintendent was a friend and I was out to him. When I left and went to [my current district], there were people who knew I was lesbian when I did that; but I wasn't out about it. And in fact, my boss within a few months wanted me and a date to go to the ballgame; so I got a gay man principal from another school district to go with me who had been the date for a partner of mine also. But after three years, that boss died and I became interim superintendent for a year. And in that same year, at the time the boss died and the board said they wanted me to be interim superintendent, I said well be aware that I am going through the adoption process. In the year that I was interim superintendent, our older son came along and I had made a decision that I wasn't going to let people think I was going to be a single parent. So I used the language of co-parent; but it was the adoption experience that outted me. I got ambushed by a rightwing board member in a closed door, one-on-one session, after which I had to call an attorney and have a conference with the board president over the threats. I got quiet but there was really no secret; and as time grew and then I when I brought our younger son to school in [your district], you gotta fill out the parent paperwork. By then, I just had to cross that threshold and now if I think it's relevant, I'll say something. Now I just got a new boss, after 15 years, and it happened on the very first day. The boys were in Wyoming and he said, "Are you gonna go get them?" And I said, "No, my partner is." We

have a lot of gay and lesbian administrators. It's just not a big deal; in fact, it's a big deal when people try to not put it out there - it's a bigger deal.

KG: How long have you been with your partner?

Lily: 18 years.

KG: That was after you came to [this district] then?

Lily: Correct.

KG: Were you partnered during your time at your first administrator position?

Lily: Yes.

KG: In your principalship at your elementary school?

Lily: Yes.

KG: For the entire time, same partner?

Lily: I changed partners when I change jobs it seems - that's really interesting, I hadn't really thought about that. But I changed after the elementary school, I had a different partner for the middle school and then I changed partners again.

KG: During your time when you're in your elementary position you said you were living in two separate worlds - two separate lives at school, what about in the community? So you're out and about with your partner, the elementary school partner and you're out to dinner, you're in public, maybe let's go with that, PDA, no PDA, public display of affection?

Lily: No, absolutely not. She was also a school administrator; we did lots of bar scenes and lots of softball and stuff like that. But no, I don't recall - I mean maybe we held hands in the movies.

KG: Has that increased through the years? The amount of affection you will show in public to your partner?

Lily: I have always had a consciousness about being publically recognized; and so I am way more comfortable being out of town. With the boys, it's been easier because we might all be holding hands; but no I don't really think, I've not been that comfortable or interested.

KG: Was it a decision or it's just not who you are?



- Lily: It's a combination of the two; but I don't actually know where they begin and end. I think it was a decision that came first; over time it's become who I am.
- KG: So when you were, let's go back to elementary, so you're in your elementary principalship, do people ask you anything?
- Lily: No, but you know what I'm like 28 years old. I'm very conscious I am ground breaking in the sense of women principals. I'm very conscious that I'm... Oh, I guess I was 29 because I turned 30 the first year I was there. I was pretty stoic; and I had the great gift of one of the teachers about three quarters of the year through my first year, tell me that people were afraid of me. And I was horrified because in my attempts to be stoic and act responsibly... I deserve and own and am qualified for this position; I had made myself pretty unapproachable by being very serious. So that feedback was really important to me; but it didn't have anything to do with me sharing my personal life. I didn't have a personal life - I was very happy being a workaholic, other than I played ball and everybody knew it because of my license plate used to say that.
- KG: Workaholic because that's who you were or workaholic because you felt you needed to be?
- Lily: No, that's who I was - I love working. Worked hard played hard - I used to play ball about four or five days a week.
- KG: So they never asked because you were unapproachable?
- Lily: I don't know. I mean how many people walk into the principal's office and say are you lesbian?
- KG: I don't know if I necessarily mean it that way. I guess more so, as you describe yourself when we talk here about knowing and building relationships with your staff, figuring out what they're good at that type of thing, with that comes a kind of give and take as far as who you are as person and who they are as a person. And so what happens when someone takes an interest, just in a way of building a relationship with you - what did you do this weekend? Who are you hanging out with? Who are you seeing? Not as (inaud) are you seeing someone but there's a curiosity about are you, this person, doing in your personal time other than working at this job?
- Lily: I was very good at always talking in first person; and it was never we, it was I and some friends. I could share all that kind of stuff; but I never had the comfort nor the desire to talk about my relationships, my personal relationships. And I really, I guess I didn't care if they speculated.

KG: Did you do any pronoun switching?

Lily: No, I had a partner who once did that; but I never did that. That really was... I had a visceral - I can talk in first person; but I don't have to make my girlfriend a he.

KG: You never brought your girlfriend/partner around during those times?

Lily: No.

KG: Have you ever? Before the adoption? Brought your partner around? To school events school functions?

Lily: No. One of my partners was a school administrator; so there were occasions where we would end up in the same venue. Although she was high school and I was elementary at the time; but no, I wasn't bringing a partner around.

KG: Were there ways in which you dressed, presented yourself (inaud) that you made conscious decisions about as to not or in a way to not mark you, for lack of a better word, as a lesbian?

Lily: It is true that there was a time where I wore nylons, pumps, skirts and frequently a blazer in the very beginning. This is funny - so I'm a young lesbian principal, oxford shirts and bow ties, which that was the out when the teacher said people were afraid of me. Well I get, I had kind of a severe sculpting of hair or at least it was I think it was cute; but it was a uniform, it was an outfit, it was a look.

KG: Did you pick it for a reason?

Lily: No, it was popular to me; but part of that though, again it would be hard for me to delineate in that era whether it was being a young woman principal versus being a lesbian. I was way more conscious of holding my ground as a woman; so when I went to [this district], I was still wearing skirts. Now I don't think this has anything to do with sexuality, I just quit wearing skirts when I quit wearing pumps. I'm downwardly mobile when it comes to shoes now; and part of that is age. I don't feel the need any more. There are some styles that I will not wear because I think it's not attractive. Over the years, I can't put language to that; and there are some styles I will wear casually that I think are more lesbian looking but I don't really care anymore.

KG: Did you care then?

Lily: I cared; but I don't know if it was because I was a lesbian - I really don't. And I sure wasn't fooling the other lesbians.

KG: So elementary principal, ring or no ring?

Lily: I might have had a ring. You know what I've almost always worn a ring to avoid the question.

KG: What kind of ring?

Lily: Well now I've been wearing this one for 20 years; and I was wearing rings because I didn't want to be hassled.

KG: Hassled by?

Lily: By men colleagues.

KG: So not necessarily to say I'm married, I'm partnered, I'm not partnered; but just to avoid being seen as a target for unwanted...?

Lily: Yes.

KG: We kind of talked about that no staff have really asked during those two principalships. What about the one's that identified as gay and lesbian? Did they?

Lily: I would see some of them at the bar; at first I had to kind of work through 'oh my god' but then I'm like, "Okay they're here, I'm here, get over it this." I actually became very good friends in the year in the spring that I was leaving.

KG: So out to the ones you saw out?

Lily: No, it didn't have anything to do without; it just, we just you know eyeballed each other and said (inaud). And actually when the school threw me a going away party when I was leaving the middle school, we had drinks after the thing [and] we started hanging out socially.

KG: Did you have did students ever ask?

Lily: Not at the time, but I had a literally a former student of my teaching in Lawrence look me up, who had who had been kicked out of her house as a young lesbian. She looked me up because in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, she had decided I was lesbian and I was the person she needed to contact. She was probably about 18 or 19 when she contacted me. I had relationship with another family and still do with one of the sons; and I've been out to them forever.

But I don't know when it came up; I think when I started, I've always sent holiday letters and I'm pretty open about everything in a holiday letter. For whatever reason, we've exchanged holiday letters for 35 years.

KG: You exchanged holiday letters with families with kids from your school?

Lily: Yeah but this was a former student of mine from Lawrence, Kansas, whose family I got particularly connected with even after I left the classroom and didn't have any of the kids anymore. But that's my relationship, I mean I would still introduce [him] as my former student and he would introduce me as his former teacher and he's 40 years old.

KG: Did they ask are you married?

Lily: Not that I remember, no.

KG: What about families? Did you have experiences with families of where parents were lesbian or gay?

Lily: Yes, some; I can remember a couple I played ball with, couple I might have run into at the bar; but we were all about business when we were at school.

KG: Do you think you were all about the business because you were all about the business? Or do you think you were all about the business as a form of protecting yourself from what might come out if you weren't all about the business? So what was your thought process in that?

Lily: I had a couple of experiences that gave me a healthy sense of fear. One had nothing to do with sexuality but my high school years ended in some racial tension that carried death threats and fires and stuff that I thought, well okay. Then I had been held at gunpoint when I was in college and it was an attempted rape; but it was, it turned out to be nothing more than being held at gunpoint but that was enough. Then I had this church experience where in the end being lesbian was something to boo. And the fact that at the time there was a conversation about could lesbians adopt children and be parents; and the answer was no, legally that was still difficult to do and there was rousing applause and whooping and hollering. And I thought, "oh man, this is really not safe." I had friends who were getting fired; and I had friends who were getting stalked. And I was absolutely a part of a closeted lesbian community and a lot of them were women trying to make their way in leadership roles. And one of my partners who was the high school principal used to have to go out on dates with the superintendent; and I came home to my house one night and she's cornered in my kitchen by the superintendent. It was all about threatening her with you don't want me to expose you, give me a little loving kind of

thing. So it wasn't, it didn't feel safe; now I'm somebody that scares very easily. But I will never forget the first professional conversation I was in when I outed myself; and luckily it was with another lesbian at the time and it was a pretty intimate setting. There was about eight of us who happened to be in England presenting at a conference; and we'd gone to a play that introduced the conversation. So then we are staying up all night having this conversation because what else are you going to do when you are hanging out in England with a bunch of colleagues. And I woke up the next morning with a huge emotional hangover and terror over what have I, and this was after I was in [this district] as assistant superintendant, over what had I done. And the one thing that I was able to receive in that conversation was that there was absolutely nobody sitting in that room that didn't already know that I was a lesbian and that this other woman was a lesbian; and they had been dying to express their acceptance, their concern, their allyship and to be able to engage in a open conversation. And while both of us were willing and scared and think of the time as right only because we were both there, we talked about it later over about how that never would have happened if either of us had been by ourselves. And how important it was to discover that there weren't really as many hostile people out there anymore; but I didn't know because I wasn't looking for the opportunity. In the meantime, I had the experience of now I went back to church because I'm now partnered with a priest; and I end up in a parish that has families in it who were a part of my schools in [my previous district]. And that was the first time I was forced to think about integrating my life; and it was the first time I felt publically out it wasn't at work, it was at church. Now I'm publically outted, not only that I'm partnered with the priest and guess what we're adopting a child. They through us a shower and I'm totally undone over oh my God all of these people know that I'm a lesbian and they're okay with it. So there was a big re-entry journey for me that happened; and then this England trip happened. A couple of years later, I can't quite remember the sequence of that; but I know that we already at least had one boy at the time and that was profound. I had colleagues in [this district] that knew I was a lesbian; but there was enough hoopla in the community about that that it was not beneficial to speak from that perspective.

KG: Hoopla about?

Lily: Sexuality, Gay-Straight Alliance, Day of Silence, the religious tension that exists there.

KG: In [this district]?

Lily: Yeah.

KG: Is sexual orientation part of your anti-discrimination policy I guess was it in [your previous district] and is it in [this district]?

Lily: No and no. It is in city ordinance in [this community]; it is in bullying, not in employment.

KG: Would that have made a difference for you in [your previous district], do you think if it had been?

Lily: No, I don't think so. I wasn't really afraid of that. I never felt that my job was threatened. I wasn't looking for protection - I was really clear this was my own number, I had done this, this was my own fear. I don't think I ever realized how afraid I was until well I got hit with a, there was a legal issue when I was leaving that had to do with the fact that the superintendent didn't want me to leave and tried to entrap me. And I had to get an attorney; and so I had to tell the attorney, "okay and I'm lesbian and the superintendent knows it and I don't know if this is going to get pulled out." And in the end, the board wrote me an apology because the whole thing had been, I mean it became clear to them that I had followed all protocol/procedure and everything in getting another job. But at the time, I wasn't here, I am now going to a new job and I have to get a freaking attorney to leave without a dishonorable discharge from [the district] because and I didn't know if sexuality was going to be the trump card for me or not.

KG: That's when you realized that you had some fear? At that point?

Lily: That was the first time that I ever thought it could be a public threat; up until then, I just didn't feel emotionally safe. And I just didn't really spend that much time studying it; I really didn't know life any other way, it wasn't a question.

KG: Are there specific things that you don't do because you don't want to reinforce stereotypes - let's say with your appearance or the way you speak or the way you present?

Lily: Over the years the answer would be yes - can I conjure up all the examples? Over the years, at one point I had hair shorter than I have now - so obviously the hair wasn't something I was too afraid of. I think in [previous district] I was probably very conscious of fairness; because first of all, there's the stereotype of the black community having less tolerance for issues of sexual orientation and I probably wanted to be sure I had really good relationships first before anybody found out. I worked hard at that relationship piece because I wanted it to be contrary to whatever stereotype was out there; whether that was related to how you are with children or angry lesbian or (inaud). I mean there are names that we have

called ourselves that I actually take some pride in; but I wouldn't want to be called them by anybody else.

KG: Like?

Lily: Bulldyke - was I? Okay, I'm five foot four and yes I have a consciousness about not appearing too butch; but part of that is because I'm aggressive and so I would seek to temper the aggressiveness.

KG: You don't mind the short haircut, so what do you offset that with if you're guarding against being too butch?

Lily: Necklines, softer necklines - I don't like a hard look. There are there are generally some styles I have learned I just don't like because it has got some sort of little boy look to it.

KG: So is it important to you as you are a school administrator to appear at least somewhat feminine?

Lily: I don't have any illusion that I am somewhat feminine. I think it's more to not overly appear to not appear... In [my previous district] people dressed; so I was not casual. I am way more casual now than I would have ever been there; but I am conscious of about my casualness, about trying not to be disrespectful to the "office." It has to do with me thinking I [have] enough stereotypes to fight because my children are also African-American. So I mean I never know if there's an issue what the devil it is. So I'm thinking I don't have to put people off in the way I look also; and actually I don't care to be confrontive in my dress.

KG: You said two separate lives in your principalship, adoption then you were a little more open because it was a forced public outing. So now you're in [this district], now you're Assistant [Superintendent] for Curriculum and Development, so does your partner attend work functions?

Lily: No. She does not. She did go to Open House; I mean our children are in [this district]. She did go to Open House last week - that has to do with her.

KG: Do you still live a very separate life?

Lily: No, because my children are in [this district]; but that has progressed in ways that even I wasn't even conscious of until last week when we had open house. And I was surprised at how many parents I now know, not because of my position but because of my kids.

KG: Are you out to families in [this district] now?

Lily: I'm out to the lesbian families; and I'm out to the families who include a staff member in [the district]. I don't think there's a teacher I sat in Open House with last year last week, and actually [my partner] went to that, who wouldn't have known. I mean who they know I'm lesbian.

KG: So you go to school events in [the district] together with your partner?

Lily: We have; however she's been pretty inconsistent with that.

KG: How long have your kids been in [the district]?

Lily: [My youngest son] has been there since 2<sup>nd</sup> grade - he's in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. [My oldest son has] been there since 7<sup>th</sup> grade and he's in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

KG: Do you socialize with other administrators in central office outside of work?

Lily: No. The climate hasn't really been available; it hasn't availed itself to that kind of thing. There's been some turnover at central office; and it just doesn't, it doesn't seem like a good idea to me. I am very leery of mixing personal and professional stuff; and I'm careful about doing, I really can only do it with people who can keep and hold boundaries. And quite frankly, not that many people who can now; that is a really judgmental thing for me to say, but it has to do with my comfort level. So I do have people, I work with people, some of whom I would consider friends. But we're really and some of whom are administrators, but it's very it's a very we're almost closeted in the work area as friends. Because I think I have been surrounded by people who didn't have boundaries; and I think somebody has to stay outside the playpen because I think it gets complicated.

KG: Do you talk about personal experiences that involve you partner at work?

Lily: Oh yeah.

KG: Do you think you attend less social work social functions because you're a lesbian?

Lily: I don't think so. I think that when I go to an event, let's just say like a trivia night at a school or something like that. No, I know what, when I stand on the sidelines when my younger son played football and I stood on the sidelines; I really had to work at having conversations with people because I don't know if I am confronting, "oh there's the assistant superintendent" if I'm confronting, "oh there's the lesbian" if I'm confronting "there's the white mom of black children." I don't how they see me; and so I'm not, I don't walk into a room and become the life of the



party. I have to decide am I there to enjoy myself; and is this where I would want to go? Sometimes no. Or am I there to be at work? Like I go the foundation function every year and I hang out with the other principals because that's where the fun is; and sure I see tons of people I know, lots of community people I know, lots of parents and we talk and we visit and we do that kind of thing . And then I go sit with the principals where I have relationships and comfort and can have fun.

KG: What went into the decision of enrolling your children in [this district]? Because I guess there's the whole public outing of the adoption and then to bring your kids into the place where you work... What went through your mind? And what tensions were there because of who you are as a lesbian mother and as a lesbian assistant superintendent?

Lily: When our older son was ready for kindergarten, we toured twenty-one schools trying to figure out where to go and we went insane. That included [this district] and I didn't want him coming to [this district]; I wanted them in a predominantly black school because I felt strongly that their first school experience should not be introducing this whole business about the racial tension that occurs in school. I didn't want them a minority; so we sought childcare and now we're trying to find a school and we are not having much success. I'm having, I'm going through this process of trying to figure out what are the things I can live with because there is no perfect school. They ended up, we ended up enrolling in \*\*\* School which is a Catholic school in the [city]. It's only half Catholic, there are even Jewish and Muslim kids there; it's predominantly black. And it happened to have been the 21<sup>st</sup> school, which is also one of the reason that we walked in and we had gotten to the point where we are walking into schools and saying we are two white lesbians with African-American sons can you deal with us? That's kind of our opening line - that principal got up and practically hugged us. Now did I want did envision my kids were going to go to a school where there [are] thirty kids in a class and desks in a row? Absolutely not, but I thought I know how to deal with this, I can deal with this. Everything about this place is what I want. He [then] ended up going to [another school] for two years [before he came to this district.] [My son] who's the younger entered kindergarten at \*\*\* [and] first grade. In October of his second grade year, I took him to [my district] and I took him to an elementary school that I think everybody was really shocked where I took him; but I took him to the school that had the most men and the most black teachers. It was also the school where I had most historic relationships; and I knew they could deal with me and I could be comfortable with them. And he went through, so he started then in October of his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade year and he went through that school through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Now interestingly, then he went to the middle school. He was there for 6<sup>th</sup> grade and he was there for 7<sup>th</sup> grade until last December when he started getting targeted by his classmates. He identifies gay; and he started

getting targeted and it was a carryover of some stuff that had happened in elementary school. And he couldn't shake it; and a couple of things were happening and finally an incident happened where he was truly afraid and it was a terrible story and it happened right before winter break. I kept him home the last day [before] winter break and we spent all of winter break soul searching of what are we gonna do. And it was even clearer to me that he couldn't go back there; but then there's the question of where the devil is he gonna go? So we spent the first week of January and he visited [a private school] and he visited the other middle school in [the district], and he wanted to go to the other middle school. The short answer is they weren't there by first choice, they ended there by default in part because I need to hover and I always thought they would end up there I just didn't know when and how. I like that they're there.

KG: So in your office as an elementary school principal in [your previous district], any artifacts?

Lily: In my office? No. When I was an elementary principal, my license plate said 'downhill' because I was an avid skier. When I was a middle school principal, my license plate said 'softball'.

KG: Pictures in either of those places?

Lily: No.

KG: Pre-adoption pictures?

Lily: No. Pre-adoption, interestingly, my license plate said 'integrate' and it still does. So I've had that license plate for, I went to [this district] with 'softball' license plate and I changed it to 'integrate' so I guess I've had it for 15 or 18 years. In my office now I have pictures of the boys. Interestingly I have a picture of my very first girlfriend from church camp when I was 18 - that's kind of a long story. I have that picture up there; and I have a picture that was taken, we had an extended family, a friend of ours who adopted about the same time we did has two daughters and the boys and the girls are like cousins. So it's a picture of all of us in Miami with this extended family; so it's all of lesbian moms and all kids. And I have a picture of that in my office - now we're talking it was sent attached to an email and I printed it on black and white printer; but it's hanging on my bulletin board.

KG: No pictures of your partner?

Lily: She's in that picture.

KG: But no pictures that would identify you as a family with your partner and your children or you two as a couple?

Lily: No. I came through the era where that kind of stuff was so invisible. There is a piece of me that finds it to be a kin to heterosexual flaunting of heterosexism; and so I kind of don't... The most recent family pictures we have, my partner's in her collar also - I just I just don't need it at work. I don't choose to do it; it's a kind of flaunting I just find it really inappropriate. Nobody is coming into my office to talk to me about my family.

KG: Do you think you put pictures up for other people or do you put pictures up for yourself?

Lily: Yeah, so okay, maybe it's a statement about something else.

KG: How you see your different identities meaning your identity as a school administrator and specifically a building administrator at the time and your identity as a lesbian how do they interact or influence one another then and now?

Lily: I have always thought that being a lesbian gave me a particular understanding to oppression. I think that's important as a school administrator; because I think if we continue to perpetuate oppression, we're shooting ourselves in the foot. I don't think it's any accident that happens to be a passion of mine; and I think it's directly born out of... Well because of my personal K-12 schooling experience, the whole race piece was part of what I grew up with; but I was also a white person. So I do think and I wasn't a lesbian then, well or actually I probably was. Well I would have been a lesbian at 12 if I could have found another girlfriend that would.

KG: Is there anything you want to add that you haven't got a chance to add, specifically about your identities as building administrator and as a lesbian that we kind of in context or to add to the context as we work toward more of the details of your experience and what all this means?

Lily: There is no doubt in my mind that I used to aspire to the superintendancy; and I did think being lesbian might be a handicap. Now I know there are superintendents that there are lesbians that have been superintendents; and I still think it's a handicap. It's definitely a handicap in [this district]. Now since you're going to protect my identity, I'm not really interested in making this a [district] issue. I also know because of this run-in I had with the conservative religious people after the first adoption, I really also felt that I couldn't get another job - that that network would do me in literally if I tried to look (inaud). So it's less about my identity as a lesbian when I

was a principal; and I don't really see that as a barrier for me if I wanted to be a principal again. But there's no doubt in my mind that there's some districts and some jobs that I might aspire, particularly superintendency, where that wouldn't be the case. I mean we just hired another superintendent; there's nobody. Nobody was really concerned that I wasn't that interested; and part of it is that it would be hard for me to know how much of that is lesbian and how much of that is woman because even the board members had trouble saying 'he or she' in the process of advertising and pursuing candidates because it was 'he' all the way.

KG: When you decided that you wanted to adopt, did you think about how that would impact your aspirations to be a superintendent at that time?

Lily: Only from the point of view of figuring out how to balance the demands - that was the only thing that had ever crossed my mind. I didn't really think about it as having implications for my career; now the best thing that happened to me was spending a year as interim superintendent because I kind of got it out of my system. I decided that really wasn't my calling; it wasn't that I couldn't do it and it wasn't that I didn't think I would be good at it, that it really wasn't my calling. I'm not in education to be a politician; so that was kind of an easy out for me. But the other thing that became clear to me was that I was no longer interested in working 24/7. I really didn't mind doing that as a principal; and I didn't mind doing it as an assistant superintendant. But it became clear to me and when people say to me, "Why aren't you pursuing the superintendancy? I say I don't want to work 24/7 - that's true. The other thing, I am not, I don't need to put myself out there as a lesbian and I don't need to be somebody's social experiment. Some could do it and one in particular was pretty successful; but she's since died. It was a lonely life; and I've got a good friend who's a retired superintendent - it was lonely.

KG: Do you think there is a space at this point for, not necessarily in [this district] but in [the county] somewhere, a space for an out lesbian to be a superintendent?

Lily: I'd like to say yes; I'm trying to think, I'm doing the rolodex in my head of districts. I don't know. Oh you asked about bumper stickers - I had a Human Rights Campaign bumper sticker on my car for probably more than ten year; I got a new car this summer and I made a decision not to put it back on.

KG: Why did you decide not to put it back on?

Lily: It's so political to put it on a new car; I don't remember when I put it on my old car, it had been there and it faded. At one point and I actually replaced it because I just decided it belonged on the car; but there's

something about getting a new car, it seemed like a bigger statement than I felt like I needed to make. So I think I've been marked with a social justice agenda; I'm not looking to be in people's faces necessarily.

KG: Social justice agenda around race issues or social justice agenda around queer issues?

Lily: Most pronounced would be race; but I think there's an assumption that immediately behind that is going to be issues of sexuality. I am the least effective spokesperson on social justice in [the district]. One it's sort of assumed and that it would be me; consequently, it needs not to be me because it's not a single person issue. That's actually worked in terms of gaining more allies and more voices and stuff; but it has taken a while. The other is that people don't know how to separate me as a parent and me as a lesbian; it's like you know men are the best voices on sexism, I am not the best voice on sexual orientation and I'm not the best voice on race.

## Interview Two

KG: What did your typical day look like when you were a school administrator?

Lily: Well I remember that I was "quote on all the time." I would get there early; I'm a task-oriented person. So I assigned myself the task of visiting; I was there early in both buildings.

KG: What time's early?

Lily: 7:00am

KG: What time did school start?

Lily: Elementary was 8:45am and middle school was 8:15am, maybe. I would do what I could in the office then I would be in the halls greeting people, greeting the kids, greeting the staff. I would meet with anybody that I needed to meet with; sometimes there were parent conferences and stuff first thing in the morning. Of course I would be scheduled to do classroom observations; but I walked the building everyday and popped in every classroom every day. I also worked the cafeteria - I loved the cafeteria. Particularly the middle school, I was always there all 3 lunches; sometimes I was doing discipline referrals while I was in the cafeteria because I could take the quick ones with me. A lot of times I was doing grade checks with kids in the cafeteria; and with the elementary kids, I frequently, you wouldn't be allowed to do this now a days, but I frequently was behind the line serving and I was doing spelling tests of the menu. Then in both cases, I taught kids how to wipe tables with sponges.

Then I, what I remember, I would almost always go back to the office right after lunch because I felt like I had been out and about and it would be okay for me to go do some desk work. This was for the most part this was pre-email. I stayed very late.

KG: How late is very late?

Lily: Like 6:00pm, I mean I usually would average 11 hours days and at the middle school we invented a lot of after school activities.

KG: So then you'd go home and what?

Lily: Well if I could, I'd meet friends and go out to eat. I this was all pre children for me. It would be unusual if I didn't take something home and expect to do it; so I frequently I went home and worked more and crashed.

KG: So you're putting all your all into this job, both jobs, and you're partnered; and you're not really out at work, so is there time I mean how do you maintain that relationship?

Lily: Well, I was in two different relationships in those two principalships. One was with another school administrator and that was high school; so there were plenty of other activities and that piece was all understood. The other one was not with an educator; and that was more difficult and that contributed to the demise of the relationship.

KG: Did you need to work from 7am to 6pm and then at home?

Lily: I would have said so at the time; but after I became a parent, what I realized was that things that I thought were the end to themselves were really a means to an end. And if I could get clear about the real end was, I could begin to find efficiency in the means. Eventually, when I did become a parent and did have to figure that out, the first five years was very difficult. I was a workaholic and I had to go through a recovery.

KG: What's it like to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?

Lily: I am not the best spokesperson for gay and lesbian causes because I don't trust that I am not being labeled as a lesbian spokesperson versus a reasonable thinking person. By the same token, in particular [the district], as things have become more comfortable, as we are all out, it's a lot easier to have internal conversations. But still publically, I am careful because it's important to me to have credibility with as many circles as possible within the community; and I recognize that there's some parts of the community where if I don't have a relationship quite honestly my own homophobia kicks in and I don't want to lead with the lesbian

administrator. With only administration, I am comfortable about being out. And because my kids are there, I've gotten comfortable with and I'm always on guard about whether teachers are comfortable.

KG: So what do you mean comfortable?

Lily: What I never know if it's because I'm the assistant superintendent or it's because I'm lesbian or it's because my kids are African-American; so I'm always on guard about being personable and being selective about kind of... this is with teachers as a parent. With the colleagues, I'm still selective; I mean I am intense, I can be. I work at being, I think being loving is a strategy we all need; but I also sometimes continue to have to work at that because if my first reaction is to throttle somebody over something, I have to process that before I can engage. So I'm aware and people told me when I was a principal they were afraid of me; and I realized I didn't want that, so I really worked at trying to be not an icon.

KG: Do you find that because you don't want to be the lesbian spokesperson, you use other tactics to work the agenda?

Lily: Oh absolutely. In the beginning, it became clear to me on issues of race; like what's wrong with using the n word if it's between two African-American kids? Okay and it was very clear to me that if I'm going to take a stand against name calling, then I can apply that across the board and so once applied across the board, then I help people work through the fag piece and the gay piece. Because initially, people are nervous like what if he is or oops how do we do something about this because after all people have religious beliefs. And I'm like huh uh, this is not about religion, this is not even about ideology; fag is not this child's name, this is name calling and we're taking a stand against name calling. So I was able to for me in language that I now have, I would put it in a social justice context and through that journey, that's where I really tried to learn to be loving.

KG: When did you realize that you're not you shouldn't in your mind be the spokesperson for lesbian experience?

Lily: I was conscientious of the fact that we have a very polarized community that tries very hard not to be polarized. And if I was going to navigate, then I had to be fair; and therefore I wanted to most present myself as a reasonable thinking person who would logic my way through without an ideology being attached to me. I used to work with somebody who specialized in Socratic seminars and the real trick is, I don't reveal what I think necessarily but I help us get to some clarity. And it depends upon what my agenda is. I guess I felt that there was a lot of stuff about the discrimination policy in the beginning; and other than in closed doors and in smaller groups; I would say that I'm really hurt. But I didn't say that for

a long time either because I'm looking around thinking these people are clueless; they don't get it. I'm not proud of it; but I had to wait until there was an ally because in the end it was going to take some other voices besides mine.

KG: So who's the ally?

Lily: Other people who were comfortable being out; and then of course straight people who were perfectly fine. For instance I got a new boss in July and I made an agenda of things that just had kind of collected in my mind, kind of little sound bites of stuff I thought would be useful for a new person coming into the district to know. Early on something came up about the language in the discrimination policy which does not include sexual orientation; and I thought he had a very reasonable response. I was intrigued by it because I didn't know if he had a clue who he was talking to; and I thought you know what, in fairness I think I... So I put it on my little agenda thing. I gave him the agenda; and I said you know here's a few things I wouldn't mind going over. He said, "Well I see you have discrimination policy on here." And I said, "I just think we've got a fair number of gay and lesbian administrators, I just thought you might want to know that when this comes up, because it probably will, that the audience in the administrative conversation includes a fair number of gay and lesbian administrators." He's like, "Okay." Now the reason I didn't necessarily out myself was because the day before I had outed myself in an accident. It was an accidental conversation that gave me an opportunity; I wasn't looking for it, it just sort of happened.

KG: Do you have references to sexual orientation or queer experiences in your curriculum in [this district]?

Lily: I believe that there is some in health which had a human relations quality to it. And there would be some in social studies; but you will find our curriculum to be pretty void of hot buttons.

KG: Have you had an opportunity to introduce more topics and address queer issues for lack of a... just to be inclusive queer issues in your in your position?

Lily: No.

KG: Has that been something that you have thought about at all?

Lily: Well sure, I think about; and if I think about it too hard, I would define myself completely as a weasel.

KG: Why would you think of yourself as a weasel?



Lily: We have a GSA. We have a Day of Silence; and I find remarkable people for whom I would not expect them to stand up for whatever you call it, First Amendment. They didn't used to be there and they're there now. The one thing I think, what people are clear about is responding to the kids needs. So I think the response has been appropriate to date; but there's not and I think there are quite a few avenues for kids at the high school, definitely not K to 8. I think the comfort comes with hearing that it's what the kids need not what I need or not what some other adult needs.

KG: Do you think when you say, I'm not the right person to be the voice of lesbian experience, that you're letting yourself off the hook a little bit?

Lily: I don't dispute it at all that I'm not putting myself on a hook; but I'll tell you something, I'm wounded over some really awful stuff. And so I'm not that brave, I'm not (tears in eyes).

KG: Do you want to share any of that?

Lily: I had been challenged by the [previous] board over something that I didn't know how it was going to play out; so real or imagined, I was afraid. Because I resigned from a job and just got a new job; and all of the sudden, I'm like feeling like all of the sudden I don't really belong any place. But in [this district], I got ambushed by a single board member right after I adopted, in private; and I had to get an attorney to see if I needed to protect myself. And then I had to come out to the board president because I didn't know what else to do. I will tell you this, there has been a shortage of people for me to talk to and to go to and to get advice. And so I've again appealed to my own logic to reason my way through things; and it's been very lonely and on occasion it's been very terrifying. I also have just finished 15 years of working with a boss that hated me; now he would never say that, but that is my experience. Although in a strange kind of way, he was very clear about performance.

KG: Meaning your performance was acceptable or?

Lily: Sure, and that there was nothing in my performance, even though he was always trying, that would give him issue; but frequently what he went after were his perceptions of my relationships with other administrators. So he was always, you know what, in the last five years I bet I took ten years off my life; but I really felt that I didn't want to leave for a lot of reasons. So he kept me under a thumb; I think he fully knew well he was doing it. And by the same token, the threat was social justice; it wasn't me as a lesbian. But I think he was so uncomfortable with me that anything available was being used. And I worked so damn hard to be "normal" and to be unthreatening that he became a stronger spokesperson in some social justice arenas than I did, go figure. But I'm aware, I've been aware this

week of some damage on some things and I'm thinking, what is wrong with my thinking on this; and I know I've just gotten, I've just gotten too afraid.

KG: So silenced by fear kind of?

Lily: Yes.

KG: Even though he's not there anymore?

Lily: Well the thing that I've been aware of this week is that because of that fear, silence had become a habit; and so I'm I feel like I'm slowly beginning to peel off some stuff. And one of the things I'm having to monitor is the feelings that come with the peeling off; because I can go to rage pretty quickly. And of course that does nobody any good; so then I have to process that which of course I do by myself and it means I might lose an ally while I'm trying to figure that piece out so I can re-enter in some sort of sane, not the crazy (inaud) screaming lesbian way.

KG: So is that what you are going through now, your re-entry?

Lily: Yeah, I mean something just happened with one of my kids at home. It didn't have anything to do with sexuality, it had something to do with race; but it was something that, he had a piece of paper from a teacher and I mean I am there in an instant.

KG: Do you think that's years of oppression or is that personality?

Lily: Both. What I hope you are able to prove is that it is not as scary as it once was; I don't know if you'll have people my age.

KG: Describe the ways your sexual orientation impacts your professional relationships with other administrators, specifically during your time your time in [your previous district].

Lily: I don't know if any of us were any different. We might have known something about our social lives and our family lives outside of school; but you're also doing the race dance there. We were at the time just trying to figure out kind of who's safe. So okay, I'm personally guarded - I'm all about business. I'm all, but not that I can't have fun; and I loved some of those folks, loved them to pieces and have come out to one since that I stayed in relationship with. Although its, I mean I lost her for about three years and found her again; but I've had relationships with other people who were there and because of my DRIE work and I've come out to almost every session.

- KG: Did your relationship change with that person when you were able to come out?
- Lily: No, I mean she's and we've never talked; I've just had her at the home. She's met [my partner], she knew the boys; we've never really talked. But you know, she doesn't really talk about much about her life either; and I think there's discomfort.
- KG: Is it important for you for the people around you to be comfortable with your sexual orientation?
- Lily: Well it's important that they're comfortable with me. So here's the illusion, first of all is that true and secondly if it's not is it because I am separate from my lesbianism? Is it possible to be comfortable with me and not be comfortable with my lesbianism? And I would suspect that's true and over time it sort of wears down; but we worked hard. I like to have a good time with people and I like to be able to laugh with them. A colleague last week said something about she's going to retire, she's been married for 36 years, and oh my God how does one stay married that long, well you know I mean. She made that reference to me and she knew exactly what she was saying and I think that's great.
- KG: Describe the way your sexual orientation affected your relationships with students, specifically in your school administrator position.
- Lily: I think the greatest gift is my understanding of oppression and the intuition that I attributed. I don't know what that comes from, but I attributed my understanding of life as a lesbian. And I use it sometimes to generalize on in terms of just when people feel like they don't fit, they feel the pain of name calling whatever it is. So it impacts my relationships in that I'm pretty keen about paying attention to the emotional side of learning and being in schools. Beyond, that I would have to say that my experience in terms of actually interacting as a lesbian-identified person with a student, it's always been former students.
- KG: Did they ask you questions that would allude to wanting to know about your personal life? Did they ask are you married? Do you have kids?
- Lily: Not that I recall.
- KG: Why do you think that is?
- Lily: I don't know that I would allow myself to be that available. I think I have been good making some parts of me inaccessible for some people.
- KG: Do you guard the conversation? Do you steer the conversation?

- Lily: I'm not conscious of steering the conversation. With kids, you know I don't remember anything really coming up. It's funny because I was an avid softball player, my license plate said 'softball' and I remember for one of my birthdays a parent giving me a softball bat. So where as I consider that a kind of stereotypic image of lesbians, it may have been perfectly clear to them and given who they were, it probably was but it was unspoken.
- KG: Describe how your sexual orientation informs and or affects the experiences you had in your current position around, do you have much contact with families or with students in this position?
- Lily: I'm the hearing officer so I do all the discipline hearings. I know all the kids who over the years have had long-term suspensions or at least I've spent some time with them. I've had kids come to me who are gay and having a heck of a time. And it's not that I can't have a conversation with them without identifying that I'm a lesbian; but I'd like to think it might not be the same conversation. How am I informed? Usually the administrator that's bringing me in fills me in. I had one kid who gave the appearance that he was gay yet works really hard. He doesn't do anything about his appearance; but his family is all over him anyway. What I could tell was he was completely caught in this tension; and so I talked to him but I didn't out him and I wasn't going to create a thing for his family. I don't even remember what I said; it was clear to me that the reason he was sitting in my office was because he was caught. Now there have been other kids who you know, kid father's a police officer, got kicked out of the house. It was really clear to me; but we talked about what happened, what are the circumstances, what do we need to do. We didn't talk about him being gay.
- KG: Do you think you would feel more comfortable going there if you were straight?
- Lily: I think it's a really tricky thing for adults to do that when it's not initiated by the kids. The reason I do is because I've watched adults do it; and if I were in the kids' shoes, I would feel like I'm an opportunistic experiment on the part of the adults. Now I also project my own caution about outing myself on to that; there's a piece about being identified as a lesbian versus being identified as a person and I'm sensitive about that with the kids. I want to feel that I honor them as a person. And then if there's a chance to talk about who they are a person in more detail fine; but I don't want them to feel like an icon or a stereotype or a singular definition.
- KG: You said that [your youngest son] identifies as gay?
- Lily: Yes.

- KG: He's in [the district] and you're in a position of administration in [the district], has that impacted the way you feel like you need to proceed as far as advocating or not advocating for gay and lesbian issues in the district?
- Lily: Well that's a tricky one because I had to switch his school last year. I am totally and completely incensed over name calling. And I absolutely think that kids are getting the upper hand right now; and I believe that we are asleep at the switch. But the fact that I think that and I think it from a distance is a bit of a problem; because the people on site need to think that and they need to have the perspective. So I'm spending a lot of time having conversations with administrators to help them open their eyes to some stuff; and it's not that they can't see it, they don't have time to see it. They're just trying to keep a lid on now; it sounds worse than it is. And I'm overly dramatic except that then all the sudden I found that I had to be careful over turning something into an issue that looked like it was my issue as a mom because my kid had been targeted. So I've been very careful, in fact one of the first things I said to the new boss is I think it's time for us to revisit some things around bullying. I said to the community for understanding and healing, which was all about race after the murder, the shootings; I said you know the one arena that we can actually all agree on is anti-bullying and name calling. I said I really don't think there's any dispute and that's where I wanted to get people into the folds so sexuality can actually be discussed; because there's no way to talk about name calling and not talk about fag and gay. So the new boss was right on that and we actually got to do some things and I think it raised some awareness. I think people are slowing down a little bit; and I think people are paying more attention. But I've learned that it's about, first of all I don't know that I'm right; and secondly, it's about me putting it out there to see if others can latch on. Because if they don't own it and I'm not the one in the building... But I tell you what, I might have more information than some of them have because I have kids and I hear what they say. I can participate in these conversations. Having kids in the district has probably been one of the greatest professional assets I could have ever had; and at one point in time, I had one at each middle school - that was a fascinating variance.
- KG: Let's talk about lesbian experiences and how you see them either included or excluded.
- Lily: [An out lesbian administrator in our district] is an amazing person, I've never seen anybody who is so comfortable. I find that even as lesbians, we're guarded in that we wouldn't all sit together at the same table at a retreat. So we wouldn't have a lesbian table. Now I don't know that's conscious; but I think there's a certain amount of guardedness over when

people see three of us in a conversation are they thinking, “oh there’s the lesbian administrators?”

KG: Does it matter?

Lily: No, but I’ve been wondering that with a new boss. I sort of like to project, I wonder how he sees us. I wonder what he sees because with a new boss, you start noticing that kind of stuff. And actually, I think there are alliances that people... I don’t happen to think the central office should reveal alliances or closer friendships to some than others; and I think that occurs. So you know if one pays attention to that, they might notice if the lesbians are huddling. One of the schools had a trivia night last year and I know that some of the staff had a table. I know at the table were a couple of gay partners and a couple of lesbian partners that included administrators. And one gay assistant principal who we’ve had to suspend kids for harassing him; so it’s just part of it you know it’s part of the landscape.

KG: Would it shock you if they had a wedding shower?

Lily: Well, I was shocked when they had it for [another lesbian administrator]. Mostly because I’m looking at the staff and thinking you’ve got to be kidding me. I would have never expected this; but, who’s gay, his PTO came to him because he does some sort of, he sells a dinner at his house every year as a fundraiser. And the people that bought it said we’re not coming unless [your partner’s] there. He’s reported on numerous occasions about how inclusive; but it has been, it’s been the reverse, it’s been the community making the inclusion. I was at Open House a few weeks ago and one of the board members, who’s also Episcopalian, was coming up the steps and I said to [my partner], “here comes \*\*\*, she’s on the board and she’s Episcopalian” So [the board member] sits down and I didn’t know if [my partner] had ever or if [the board member] had ever met, so I introduced them; and [the board member] immediately talks about church.

KG: Did you introduce her as your partner?

Lily: I did not.

KG: Did you just say this is [Kathryn]?

Lily: Yeah, because I knew that she already knew that. That night [Kathryn] chose to introduce herself to teachers as [my son’s] other mom.

KG: How does your sexuality affect experiences in the community beyond students and family?

Lily: I haven't been partnered with somebody who ever challenged me on that. Would we go to a trivia night? I don't know.

KG: What do you mean challenged you on that?

Lily: Well, I've never had to think about what to do. When [our youngest son] played basketball, we would go to the games; and we go to the soccer games, but we're not really interacting. I'm pretty sure [my son] had some boys say no to a sleep over at our house in elementary school because they were not going to let their kids spend the night in our house; and I'm pretty sure that had to do with my sexuality, our sexuality. The last time we had a sleepover, we've always told the boys that they don't have to be outed if they don't want to be; so the last time [my youngest] had a sleepover, [my partner] left. I mean he asked that only one of us be there; and I'm the one to be there because I'm the school mom. When [our son] had his soccer banquet last year, he asked [my partner] not to go. We've always said to them. [My oldest son] had a girlfriend for a long time before he told her he had two moms; and he's very good about talking about my parents. So there's that factor about the community piece.

KG: So it hasn't really been an issue in the community. Was it an issue with previous partners?

Lily: I do believe it's a reason why, I think there are a lot of reasons why I would never be a superintendent in [this district]; but I do think that's a reason, one of the reasons.

KG: Because you're a lesbian?

Lily: Because I'm a lesbian.

KG: Do you think that it would impact your ability to get a job in another county school district?

Lily: Being lesbian? Yes, getting a superintendency and maybe even something else; but I don't know. I mean right after I got ambushed by this board member, which was 15 years ago almost; I thought well, and he's very much into the [extremely religious conservative] political kind of circles, I thought well, that's it, there's not, if I ever wanted to go somewhere else it isn't going to be here.

KG: If you had not had that experience, do you feel the same way?

Lily: I probably would not have. It's, I think it's perfectly possible to coexist and not know. I've had people say, there's a current elected official who was once a board member and now in the legislature who knows I'm a

lesbian and despises that and I think doesn't trust me at all because you don't trust lesbians. Somebody said, we've always had a cordial relationship and on occasion he actually comes to talk to me at a public event like he makes the ovation, but somebody told me a couple of months ago, "he's not doing you any favors." I have no idea what that's about, not a clue; and you know what it wouldn't be about sexuality, it would be about race. Where I have pushed buttons, it's been about race, the lesbian loud mouth.

KG: Do you think that something you've thought about all along one of your aspirations like how being a lesbian if you were going to be out if it would affect...?

Lily: No, I never once considered it because I knew, I know I was about business. Because it's lonely and because I've done it for a year, it's a 24/7 job; so as I became a parent, I really didn't care anymore.

KG: Is it the publicness that would not put you out there do you think?

Lily: There's an image; and it's male for one and family. I mean you know it's, it was important to hire someone with a family and an extroverted wife.

KG: A traditional family?

Lily: Yeah, it fits an image and its fine. I mean it could be in another district; it doesn't have to be in this one. I mean if I still wanted to pursue a superintendency, it wouldn't have to be in [this district]; it could be in another place. Now is that a good idea? I don't know the women who have been superintendents have either not lasted, stayed closeted - I'm talking about lesbians. I don't know.

KG: What supports your development of a positive lesbian identity as a school administrator?

Lily: I have known some absolutely fabulous lesbian administrators. What I enjoyed was the safety of conversation with them; but it wasn't about being lesbian. It was about just the shared journey; it was just nice to share it with lesbians. That begs the question about whether I have a positive lesbian identity. I would say I'm on the positive side of the spectrum; but I think I support it. I think I've had to get there the hard way; and I've had a lot of friends... Now I was one of the first to be an administrator; there have been a lot of lesbians that came after me but most of them are teachers. I had a circle of lesbian education friends that eventually one became a superintendent. It was all about being a strong woman in that era.

KG: Was it more about being a strong woman than being a strong lesbian?



Lily: Yes.

KG: Has that lessened? Now is it more about a being a lesbian or do you still feel sexism alive and well?

Lily: Oh heavens, yes! It's an interesting question because my strongest identity is probably that of lesbian even more than woman but they're pretty close.

KG: As you've seen younger lesbians enter the profession has that changed the way you look at the profession and what it means to be out?

Lily: I find the world in general to be more, to have a stronger capacity to handle sexual orientation as a norm, issues of sexual orientation.

KG: What has impeded your ability to develop a positive or...?

Lily: Fear. I've never I thought I would be killed; although I've been threatened. So I might of thought I could be fired. I had a body guard when I was in [my previous district] for a day once. It didn't have to do with being a lesbian; it had to do with having taken action. So what impedes? Fear, I mean fear and having been hurt. Which I don't scare easily, but I have been terrorized. So I'm in recovery.

KG: What are some of those stressors that are that come with coming out or...?

Lily: Not really knowing if it's going to change relationships; and then not really knowing if one is going to be discounted. We find reasons to discount people all the time. Last week, the whole week was about reasons to discount the President. Once there is a targeted identity that you know you can put on somebody, you never know when that targeting is going to show up. And I'm already carrying the woman piece.

KG: Did you think about that when you decided to adopt?

Lily: Which part?

KG: You carrying a woman target, a lesbian target and now white mother of African-American children target?

Lily: No, the way I used to think about it was I used to say, "Oh my God, one of these days these boys are going to wake up and say oh I have two white lesbians as parents." Our African American friends said it isn't going to be color that will be the problem, it's going to be the sexuality that will be the challenge - it will be the sexuality.

KG: Can you describe some of the success of coming out in the workplace?

Lily: Freedom, less contortion and fewer contortions; it can be more my choice about how much I want to engage or put out that's personal versus... What's coming out really puts that issue on me; I can no longer say, "oh I'm not doing it because yada yada yada" whatever I can make up. No it's really on me, on what is my comfort level, how much I want to you know share.

KG: What do you think about when you're making that decision?

Lily: I figure I'm 56 years-old, this should not be a decision, this should just be my life. This should just happen because it happens.

KG: Initially when you were coming out?

Lily: Terror. In fact, I would have to have a sort of emotional checking session before I would do the DRIE fabric of oppression. And then I would have to have an emotional checking session when it was over because it felt it was a vulnerability that I was not terribly experienced in.

KG: When you actually made the decision to come out to people in like maybe a one-on-one situation or in a small group, what are the things you thought about before you did that?

Lily: I've never made a big pronouncement. I've just put the information out there. I worked with a couple of people for 20 years; I don't think we've ever had a conversation about me being lesbian. They just knew that [my partner] and I adopted these children, that's what they knew.

KG: So is there a difference between coming out and being out for you?

Lily: Me coming out would be the process of revealing my lesbianism to somebody; being out would be me not censoring.

KG: So do you think you went through the process of coming out [in this district]?

Lily: I did, it was a very specific event; but it was a small group. But it was a profound event because it was the first time in a professional setting that I made that decision [in England].

KG: So was that the only time you came out?

Lily: Yes.

KG: Have you ever, other than the time in England, have you ever gone through the process of coming out in [the district]?

Lily: Well, it's funny. In an odd kind of way, inviting people to participate in your study was a naming of things that just doesn't get named that often.

KG: Would you say you're out in your district?

Lily: If there's a continuum of out the answer's yes; but I would say probably [a] percent of the people who know I'm lesbian know it from a hearsay conversation or that information that you passed on probably more than 50%.

KG: Would you say most of the people in [the district] know?

Lily: Yes.

KG: Are you out in [the district]? If you are, if you go through the process of being out or do you actually have to come out?

Lily: You might conclude I'm not out. This is a by-product of my own homophobia. We had a Teacher of the Year one year, a gay man, and he addressed his experience in [the district] as a gay man in his opening of school speech. He did it because he wanted people to consider that there are things we could still do to improve our inclusiveness; and that there are things we could pay attention to. Like when he drove in his convertible and was spit on by kids passing in another car. Well on one hand, people were touched because they had worked with him for years and they didn't know that he had all these experienced. On the other hand, people were pissed because that wasn't what they wanted to hear on the opening day. They considered it to be a political opportunist kind of thing. So I do guard against being the lesbian the person, the lesbian administrator, and the person of political persuasion who's also the lesbian administrator.

KG: Do you distance yourself from that perceived to be too gay?

Lily: I don't think so.

KG: How did you feel when he was talking about it?

Lily: I read the speech in advance. I was nervous for him; and I could feel the tension around me because I was sitting with board members who were not comfortable and not happy. And truthfully, had he asked my advice, I would have asked him to think about whether or not he thinks that's the opening of school message; but he viewed it as his one chance to say something and he tried to put it into a constructive. The question is, did he? What I have to tell you, I have really learned the hard way about taking on born again perspectives and mentalities and missions because I think it's not for me I've decided - because it's too lonely, it's too

isolating. There's too much rejection - I can't handle that. So I have lots of born again emotions in the sense that I would change a lot of things quickly; but I recognize that in the process of doing that a lot of people get alienated and also hurt. And I'm really not interested in passing on the hurt I've felt; so it's my whole piece about we don't do anti-oppression by turning around and oppressing people for all the idiotic things that they do. So I will, I am, I have become very process conservative. If you let me design a strategic process, I will do it; but if you don't let me design it, I will be process conservative because I'm going to be sure that we keep people at the table and in the conversation. And I don't know that this opening of school speech did that for the arena of sexual orientation.

KG: So do you keep people at the table by making sure that all are comfortable and if you do that are you accomplishing anything in the process?

Lily: I think it's okay to lean into discomfort; but I think it's important that you support them through the process and you love them through the discomfort. I think both is possible, one is that you're protecting them too much and not asking the hard enough questions; but I don't think you always know from person to person.

KG: How does the constant being out affect you emotionally? Physically and emotionally?

Lily: Well it should affect me in positive ways because I'm not hiding anything; I'm not conscious of how it affects me.

KG: How did it affect you when you were living...?

Lily: Yes, probably two ways. One was I deflected personal conversations; and I have to tell you I don't think I fooled the middle school staff at all. But I think we all, but there were so many things going on, people having affairs and all kinds of stuff; I think we're all just politely putting the blinders up when it's convenient and we loved each other to pieces. But emotionally it takes some work to always be on guard to deflect. Then the other piece to that is that I really compartmentalize. I don't know if that's good, I haven't decided. It's practical and it's functional; but I mean when I'm at work, I am at work and when I'm on the softball, I am all about being a softball player, and when I am at the bar, I am having a good time. The softball team just did a thing where we went out to help a friend with one of the other members who had a cabin, 13 lesbians and their power tools it was a good time, the greatest.

KG: Do you still find yourself doing that now compartmentalizing your life?

Lily: Not as much. I'm out in my neighborhood and there are plenty gay and lesbians in the neighborhood. That's also fun part of it, being able to connect with other gays and lesbians. I connect with them at work; I didn't used to be able to do that. I can do that at home, I didn't used to be able to do that. I do that at church, I didn't used to be able to do that. Qualitatively, it's much improved and very different than when I started out.

KG: Has it been negative for you in any way? Have any of your fears been realized?

Lily: Fear is that I'll be disconnected; and that's been true. But in retrospect, I was probably disconnected before I lived in the illusion that I wasn't and I kind of authentically really care, really care about it because it's probably not an authentic connection.

### Interview Three

KG: What does it mean to you to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian, either in your current position or in your previous positions?

Lily: It means that I walk with, I walk in a world with multiple identities, some of which are compartmentalized and some of which are not. I think it gives me a particular insight into subtly, nonverbal code language. It probably gives me some skills related to safety other identities. One other thing, this seems like a firm grasp of the obvious, it's really important to be very, very good. In the beginning when probably my homophobia controlled me more than I like to think it does now, I was aware that my job security could be vulnerable; and therefore, I should never cut corners or do anything that would cause one to think that there would be another reason for me to have a job threatened that wouldn't necessarily be because I'm lesbian, but could be coded as performance. So I just made sure it wasn't.

KG: You said safety, it gives you an insight into safety, what does that mean?

Lily: There are stigmas out there, real or imagined, I mean I knew somebody once that got diagnosed with breast cancer and was afraid to tell anybody for fear of the stigma again, real or imagined. I understand that those can take over one's mind; so that would be an example of and I think also to be conscious of the possibility that threats loom around the corner, which is kind of a dramatic statement. I think though particularly with regard to name calling and bullying and bully associated with sexuality, it's easy for people to say, "oh I don't believe that really happened." It's easy for people to say, "I'm sure he didn't mean it." And finding a way to raise

those issues up without making it personal; but also knowing that just because someone else hasn't experienced it doesn't mean it's not real.

KG: Do you still feel like you have compartmentalized identities?

Lily: Well definitely less so than I used to; but I'm not going to say that I don't. And actually, my compartmentalizing now probably has as much to do with I'm pretty careful about interacting with staff when I'm in a parent role versus when I'm in an administrator role and identifying. If I'm going to email a teacher and it's from my parent role, I'll write \*\*\*'s mom, \*\*\*'s mom talking here. So yeah, I do that compartmentalization.

KG: When did that really stop with you?

Lily: It's been a progression. I think it continues to be a progression; but I would say probably in the last four years I've made the greatest progress because I've had both kids in the district. So I was interacting with more people as mom.

KG: If the kids hadn't come to [the district], would life look different for you now in [the district] as who you are?

Lily: Yes in that I could believe I'm not making my sexuality known because I wouldn't necessarily have a reason to.

KG: What strengths does identifying as lesbian give you when working with students in your capacity as a building administrator?

Lily: I don't honestly know if it was as much the identity as it was the awareness. Particularly for kids that appear to be gay or lesbian and wanting them to feel safe, wanting them not to feel threatened, wanting them... I worked really hard to not respond or react out of a place that would be surprised or judgmental; that whoever they were and however they presented themselves was just fine. Now I don't really think that people who aren't lesbian can't do that. I don't know if that's a direct correlate; but there was a little bit of treat people the way I'd like to be treated probably influencing that.

KG: What about with families during that time?

Lily: What I am most conscious of now is that I did a fair amount of counseling and advising never having been a parent; and I think it's less about being lesbian and much as being conscious that I wasn't necessarily living a parent role. So I had to be careful in that regard.

KG: Were you aware of that at the time?

- Lily: Oh yeah, I think I trusted my instincts on just what I thought was good for kids; but of course I would only understand that from a school point of view. What did I think with families? You know, I suppose in retrospect what I realize is that I had no other way to connect my, our kids. Weren't going to play on a ball team together and I wasn't going to run into them at church. I mean that happened later; but it didn't happen at the time. So I was just all about being their best principal.
- KG: Being all about the business and not sharing a lot of your personal experiences, did you miss out on some human connecting in that way?
- Lily: I didn't think so; and I probably don't think so now. The fact that I might not have been as forthcoming about myself did not keep me from asking them and if I thought the opening was there to continue to engage. I felt like I had a lot of information about people's lives; and I think for the most part, because I was the boss, there was permission for them not to know as much about me. I think though some of that, some of that guardedness on my part was fear; so I don't really know what some of those relationships could have been. So I would have lost in that regard even though I can practically name all of the faculties I've ever worked with and tell you what it was dear to me about every single person regardless of what an aggravation there might have been, because I knew something about their lives.
- KG: Do you have other deep relationships with people that you left in [your previous district]?
- Lily: There still people that are near and dear to me.
- KG: Are there other people that you're still close to in [your previous district]?
- Lily: You asked about near and dear friends, you know what, there are lot of them in my heart and in my head that I don't see.
- KG: Do you think had you been more open, had you felt more comfortable being more open, would those people who you hold near and dear be more a part of your life now?
- Lily: I really don't know the answer to that. But there's a gal who [was] assistant principal; we still send each other a holiday letter, Christmas card every year. And yet we spent many hours together; and yet when went home, we went home. So I will tell you, this is not, I don't know what this ingredient is but this is a compartmentalization that I'm very, that is just hard for me or not something that makes sense to me, overlapping my personal life and my professional life. I always had a whole other life outside of work. I was a musician. I was a softball player and then I've

had a whole other life at church. So it's nice when they overlap; I have a friend at church who's a teacher now. We've known each other forever and actually I knew her mother before I knew her; and it's nice, but I don't seek it. I like trying to figure out who I am when I'm not just the educator.

KG: DRIE and your participation and I know to me it is kind of related in that you're talking about mostly audiences filled with people from education and educators. I'm assuming that you come out to that, I mean during different activities at some point. Did you start your involvement in that and did that correspond with you being more comfortable in your district?

Lily: When I started doing the module of fabric of oppression, I couldn't do the heterosexism and not come to terms for myself. And so there was kind of, it wasn't accidental, it was somewhat conscious although the first time I did it, I kind of went into it thinking, "Wow, I wonder if I'm going to come out to these people." And then somehow the conversation took a turn and there wasn't a choice. I have done fabric oppression since [then] in the 2 day teaching and leading retreats; and I have not come out; and I have made two decisions about that or I've had two awarenesses about that.

KG: And those are in your district?

Lily: No, outside my district. One awareness is that I think there's a possibility that I run the risk that I end up making it about me; and although I've used myself as an example, particularly around kids that have two moms and two dads in the sensitivity I think people ought to have, I've also watched my partners of color not make all issues of color about themselves. I feel like I've kind of developmentally shifted on the continuum to thinking that that may not still be an okay thing.

KG: What do you mean, may not be an okay thing?

Lily: That I can still speak in affirming kinds of ways and from a consciousness and from an instructive kind of way that doesn't have anything to do with how I identify. And that it's important that I speak in that way but it may not be as important for them to know that I identify lesbian. Alright, so put a pause button, there the second awareness. The second awareness, except for gay and lesbian people that's the kicker, but the second pause button that I've had is, and we haven't had a DRIE this summer, and I don't know if we'll have one again. But the last few times I started watching people relate to me differently; participants related to me differently as a facilitator. And the two times that I realized I was no longer willing was when I felt personally vulnerable over hurt that I absorbed or that I interpreted; and specifically it was around the dance when all the sudden where as the group is usually pretty fluid. I don't remember your dance



necessarily; but did we have a DJ for yours? Where as the group is pretty fluid and we're all having a great time, all the sudden I thought there was a difference in people's proximity to me. Now what was interesting, the last couple of classes there wasn't anybody else that came out; and I knew darn good and well that there were people sitting in the crowds. So I thought okay, that's just kind of interesting - it is what it is.

KG: Do you think that's a trust issue? You're not feeling safe enough come out?

Lily: But I did - I never did quite doing it. And in fact, I'm now telling you this ah ha I've had that I have not been forced to kind of come to terms with it except that there's another facilitator who's gay, who does fabric of oppression, and he never uses, he rarely uses himself as an example. He's probably one of the most powerful speakers I've ever heard just on oppression period; and I thought well I don't really have to make it about me unless I think I'm doing it to... and I wouldn't be opposed to doing it if I thought I was supporting somebody sitting there who I thought needed some support; but that's kind of, I mean I can imagine that too which may or may not be true. One of the reasons that I haven't cared [about coming out in DRIE], I'm 56 - I'm thinking for heaven sakes. Two, there have been very few exceptions of superintendents sitting there who I didn't know and haven't "grown up" with. [I] thought you know what, I've been hanging out with these guys for a long time; it's really okay. And almost all of them were absolutely fabulous, the standoffishness was never with them; in fact I'll never forget the first or second time I came out, people who I have spent hours with, who I've gone on trips with and stuff like that just put me in bear hugs because for them it was like, "oh thank God, we finally got through this" for them, like big secret.

KG: Is it she doesn't trust us enough to tell us that?

Lily: I did get that feedback from people. Not so much out of DRIE, because I think they sort of got that piece; but previously I had gotten that feedback.

KG: Identifying as lesbian when you were a building administrator, what were the challenges for you working with you know families [and] students?

Lily: Well there are a lot of stereotypic assumptions that come with that that have to do with political persuasion. So somebody's kid engages in some sort of bullying, name calling that has to do with sexuality, am I going to be harsher on that kid? I feel that way in terms of race pieces or class pieces; I think the whole issue of fairness and does one's personal identity, which I think is a reasonable question for white people, does your personal identity influence whether or not you can be fair? And I find that I have to be careful about that; but that's because I get triggered, I get triggered on

race and I get triggered on bullying. It's all about fairness, and it's all about perspective, and it's all about watching people in the system make excuses for other people or be more critical of other people, particularly when they're not in touch with whatever their biases are that would influence their judgments. Being just vigilant about trying to be fair; also being vigilant about getting a laser-like view of the issue and not being distracted with... The classic one is well if the kid is black, is it okay to use the n-word? Well no, we're talking name calling; but trying to develop a laser-like vision to help people because the issue stuff gets cloudy.

KG: You have to stay away from the gray?

Lily: That's an interesting way of translating what I just said because on one hand, that's exactly what I'm saying. On the other hand, I think because I know that I'm not somebody that stays away from gray, I think I would say I work really hard to articulate when we're in gray what are the criteria.

KG: So being deliberate and specific in your actions?

Lily: That's good, sounds good.

KG: How do you receive positives or affirmations related to your sexuality when people know and they embrace that in the workplace?

Lily: Probably one of the most positive affirmations is when somebody asks about my family. Wait, that's not true because people ask about the boys; it would be when they ask about [my partner] because that's kind of the most socially acceptable way of affirming I guess that I'm lesbian.

KG: Do you ever feel like people are asking you that in a disingenuous kind of way?

Lily: No.

KG: So if they're asking they want to know?

Lily: Part of that is the hierarchy piece. I don't think people out of the blue ask you about your spouse unless they've met or had a connection or have known. For instance, when we went through adoption, there was a board member who watched and witnessed and whatever and I think politically and even religiously we're on polar opposites; but after she retired as a board member, she decided to go back into teaching. She's now chair of the high school English department; and we've been together for 20 years in these various changes and capacities. She would drag her children and give them an Egg McMuffin to an early morning meeting; and now she's a

grandmother. So when she asks me, it's all about the journey we've had together; other than that there's not much connection.

KG: What are the drawbacks of being a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?

Lily: I actually think administrators out to work hard, to present themselves as human and open and caring and all that kind of stuff... Do I work harder because I'm lesbian? If that's the case, I wouldn't say that applies to every lesbian administrator I've ever seen. So I don't know that you could generalize and part of it is how I'm perceived or what my personality is. I mean I can be so serious people see me as unapproachable because I'm focused on a task. So when I have the opportunity, I try to be personable and funny and a good listener. Is that because I'm lesbian? I don't really think so; but I don't forget my identity and I don't forget that anywhere I go, people see me as the lesbian before they see me as the assistant superintendent. Or me as the who however they see me or previously the principal, although I gave them permission not to see me as lesbian then.

KG: Any regrets?

Lily: No, but you know what, it that isn't how I'm wired. There probably are some; but it would take me a while to come up when them or I would need a particular circumstance to remind me. I'll tell you what though, we had a person leave us in July for a position in another district; and he's gay and he made a special point to come over and say to me, "I really want to thank you for being who you are." I had no idea what he really meant except I knew that he was saying for being lesbian and being out and being "a role model" or whatever that piece was; because he also mentioned another gay administrator and he said, "and I'm going to tell him thanks too." He's young this guy's young and I think he saw that maybe his sexuality wasn't going to limit him. That isn't something that I'm really conscious of; but I was really taken with that.

KG: You may not be conscious of it; but it's there. You know who you referred to me and it comes up in almost every interview we have. I don't know I whether you're out screaming from the rooftops or not. Your willingness to bring your children into the district and be a lesbian mom, and everything that goes with that doesn't go unnoticed by people who are looking for people who can help.

Lily: We had a meeting this week where I was parent and the person running the meeting, who I don't really know that well, said now is [your partner] coming? And really made it a point, which I thought almost overly stated an acknowledgement or I don't know what she was stating except it was almost overly done in a way of I'm reading this paper, I know who you

are, I know who your children are, I know who your family is, and is any other member of the family coming to this meeting? I remember the first time I filled out the enrollment forms and I thought well here we go (laugh); and I got the enrollment forms all changed because I said you know what I am so sick of typing out, crossing out father and saying parent/parent. Every one's like, yeah that's right because we have all these configurations.

KG: You were responsible for that?

Lily: Yes.

KG: Was that a hard fight?

Lily: No, not in the least. There's some things, I probably presented that as if this is not a debatable subject (laughing); I probably said, "okay this can be parent and parent."

KG: Was that during the tenure of the boss that...?

Lily: That's been in the last 15 years.

KG: Who you described as loathing you?

Lily: [Yes.]

KG: How did you find the courage to do that?

Lily: It wasn't that kind of decision. We were revising some stuff; and I said while we're revising it, let's fix this and that was that. And it that went unnoticed. The principal's knew it because we were getting their feedback on stuff that they needed; but that was not a big deal, that was not a big deal. What was a bigger deal was when somebody would call up and discover we had a book in the library about two gay penguins or something like that. That was always a bigger deal. I don't really think people noticed we changed it, I don't; well let me just say no one ever said anything so.

KG: In what ways has coming out at school empowered you? Coming out, being out, however you want to characterize it?

Lily: Here's where I go when you ask me that - I can remember times in my past where... I remember once being at an event a social event and I saw somebody from work; I can't even tell you who it was and this was you know 20 years ago, and I hid behind a pillar. This is a dance and I'm hiding behind a pillar.

KG: And they were there as well?

Lily: I always thought, this is the stupidest thing; except I did happen to know that they were straight. They were there, okay; but they're also there and I still like hiding behind a pillar. I remember I was at gay pride, I don't know how many years ago; and there was a [district] teacher there who I also knew was not lesbian. [I] see her wandering around and I'm thinking, "Well I gotta go say hi to her." I did and she was taking some class.

KG: Immersion experience (laughing)?

Lily: It was! And I'm like, oh well here let me help you. She didn't know what the AIDs blanket was.

KG: Really? So it was your opportunity to educate?

Lily: So I'm like okay. That dance is so ridiculous, so ridiculous; and I'm sorry that I did it in that regard. But I also think it's a different world; I think you know people get married in the park now a days, that just wasn't happening 30 years ago. And again, I'm 56 years old.

KG: How does gay marriage, the passing if it were to be, Iowa's done it and other places have done it. How does that affect us as educators in schools if our unions are now legal?

Lily: I don't know. For instance, we don't have partner benefits; and I would imagine if somebody came and presented a marriage certificate, we would give it to the attorney and he would rule on it. Now he's a good guy; but he also knows who's paying his bill. If he told them they needed to do it, they would do it - that's the end of that. They would do whatever he said; but I have no idea what the legal ruling would be in a state that doesn't recognize.

KG: What about the just the day to day social implications of that?

Lily: I mean I'm not telling you anything you don't know - I mean [another lesbian administrator in the district] wears a wedding ring. I don't know.

KG: I'm talking about if [this state] had voted and said instead of adding man and woman to their stuff, they would have said you know we're okay with gay marriage, let's go with it.

Lily: I don't think it necessarily changes personal opinion; and I don't really see it drastically altering group behavior. I honestly think there's so many closeted, and I'm not talking about gay and lesbian, I just think there are a lot of closeted people out there that are perfectly fine if they're given

permission to now use the law to express that they're fine. I tell you, [another lesbian's administrator's] experience and [a gay male administrator's] experience has been very telling in a community that really does not have this reputation, which is why I think you know I refer to them as closeted. They have permission because they love these people, absolutely love them, and okay fine you're gay, you're lesbian, I'm over it. There's so much of that conversation that's about icons and it's about radical demonstrations; and it's about stuff that's a long way away - well now you're talking about my principal so okay.

KG: Some perspectives, especially younger folks who have been received openly warmly even in your community that you describe very differently than they describe, they describe it as an open place, a very accepting place and your perspective is very different, why do you think that is?

Lily: One, I've been there longer. Two, what I'm happy to know about that is that this is really, this is going to sound terrible, but what I hope is that I've protected them from it.

KG: What do you mean?

Lily: I was the target and people got to practice taking their shots at me. The last shot that I know of, and it involves one of the people you're talking to but I don't know that that person knows it, was there was a parent comment made in an interview process and the parent comment was, "we don't hire any more women coaches." And it was code language for lesbian; and there wasn't anybody that was fooled by that statement. This is the one thing that is the contradiction to the former boss; he was never susceptible to that kind of thinking because he was all about performance. I mean to your death about performance; and from his point of view, you're hired to do a job, you're expected to perform, if you can prove that you can perform, then that's fine. And he was also one if you don't perform the way I want you to, you're out of here; but he was an equal opportunity in that regard. So he was not susceptible to that kind of public opinion and he would actually defend, he would be he would be a primary defender of somebody if he did not have issues of performance. But that comment was made there was a mini-campaign; it got absolutely nowhere. I don't know that that person knows anything about it.

KG: Do you feel like you have absorbed some of that stuff?

Lily: I don't know if I've absorbed it; but I think my presence in the meetings where that would be a discussion allowed it never to get trashy, it wasn't about me.

KG: It's about having a seat at the table?

- Lily: Right. The other thing though, you're talking to people who are really good at what they do. At least, I have to tell you I can't think of anybody that has really had, and I'm thinking of gay men too, I mean oh my God we have some great gay men too.
- KG: Do you think in some ways, obviously racism is everywhere it's blatant I get that I'm not ignorant to that piece, racism has somewhat gone underground a little bit more where it's not as socially acceptable to be as blatant, open with it. Do you think that we've moved that direction in issues of sexual orientation?
- Lily: That's an interesting question - yes and no. I think publically there are still hate crimes out there that occur; but I think you're probably right.
- KG: I'm talking mostly in the job; I'm not talking about the extreme, the fringes. I'm talking about in the general day to day going through life.
- Lily: I think it depends on the community. I think there's plenty of gay bashing in some church circles. I don't know if you watch Keith Oberman and Rachael Maddow; there are times when I have to quit watching for a period of time because it really it scares me. There are crazy people out there. So I think as more and more people have come out and as more and more people have one and two degrees of separation versus eight and nine as people might have once thought it was, and pretty soon now folks in their family are gay and lesbian and they come out. [I] think it's really hard to stay completely removed; but it doesn't mean that and this is true in my own life that there aren't family members that take the position of hate the sin love the sinner.
- KG: Do you think that some of us are running around with a false sense of security?
- Lily: I'm going to answer that two ways. I think that is a very significant question and I'm going to answer that in two ways. My first way is that I don't want to think that because I want, I do see the shift and I do think it is different. My other answer is absolutely, yes I think that; but what I cannot discern is how much of that is the projection based on my own experience and the post traumatic stress that I carry and how much of that is haven't had enough evidence or proof that it's a different world. Because I am utterly intrigued when people say, "oh it's a great and wonderful place" because... It's a crazy thing to be celebrating the former boss in this regard because I think I wouldn't want you to write this and have it attributed to me because if everybody else reads it, I don't want to scare them; but we certainly have members of our board, who if they got pressured, they absolutely would cave not a one of us would have an advocate or an ally. Luckily, they're powerless as an individual member;

and I think with our new boss, I'm not the least bit threatened or concerned about that. But boy, you know, because I see the kinds of stuff that they bring to us sometimes which is all about social networking and all about ins and outs and all about somebody's single opinion.

KG: It's a little risky or a false sense of security - do you think that that's the case as you see people who have come out in other places? I mean what when you see that, what do you think to yourself?

Lily: I realize we're trying not to talk about [the district]; but I have to say there is strength in numbers, there's no question about that. I think if I went back to [my previous district] today, I'm not sure what I would do; but part of that is what I know to have been some issues there in the community just in terms of homophobia. I've got really good friends - superintendents, assistant superintendent in [another nearby district] - they know I'm lesbian. I have no idea if I went to work with them, what they would say or what they would advise me or whether or not that's an issue. That's really something that I think to be out is to put an issue on the table that raises the possibility that other agendas can be deflected or be derailed. And I don't actually agree with that, I don't think whether somebody is married, whether they're straight, whether they have children, that isn't why they get hired and that isn't the job they're supposed to perform. I really don't think it should be the introductory issue. So on one hand, you could say that's not bringing your whole self to the table; for me that wouldn't be true with the people I'd be sitting around the table with. But it might be true in a larger setting; and particularly if I went to another district where I would have no history. I absolutely would not lead with, here I'm the new lesbian administrator; I would not. And given the degree to which people have not been out in the past, I think every district has to figure out how they're going to grow and that is the one thing that [the district] has been able to figure out - they've figured out that they can grow with plenty of gay and lesbian people around and it's great. But I think for districts that don't know they have gay and lesbian administrators floating around and teachers for that matter, there's still an icon, there's still a stereotype, there's still a potential target, and still an issue that might not have anything to do with the person, but might have to do with the fear. I think about what I'm going to do when I retire; and I think depending upon what I want to do and where I want to do it, I don't know what that climate or how my identity plays out. It's not that I need to be closeted and I wouldn't do it; but I also don't need to stand on a table and I would be, I would just make choices.

KG: Is being explicitly out standing on a table for you?



Lily: Well, I think it depends upon how you are explicit about it. For instance, we had a candidate for a job a couple of years ago who I thought made it a point in the interview to be sure that we knew he was gay and it seemed inappropriate. First of all, we knew it he didn't need to tell us. Secondly, it really had nothing to do with the interview. Third, it was opportunistic enough about the way he did it that he absolutely turned people off and scared people into thinking that this was a bigger agenda to him than the things we were looking for in the candidate. So I think that, and I have to tell you, I have the same knee jerk about people who are straight who walk in and talk about their families. I am sensitive to people bringing their issues to the table when it really is inappropriate, it immediately raises a flag for me on whether or not this person is clear about boundaries and is clear about sort of the fact that we're looking for somebody good. Now part of that is a leap of faith that they would have to know that's true about us; but you know part of it is presenting yourself, not as the fact that we want to hire a gay administrator we want to hire a good administrator.

KG: As you look around and you see people definitely far more out than well you are currently or were have been, do you worry about that having a negative impact on the progress that's been made?

Lily: Sometimes, yes. But it has to do with, it really has to do with the context in which they put themselves out there personally. I think as much as people need to know that we're there, they also need to know it in a context that's appropriate. So it's appropriate that I re-enter my own workplace as a lesbian mom, perfectly appropriate. But here's an odd thing, I don't know what your reaction is when you're listening to a presenter let's just say at a workshop and when they're giving examples of whatever it is they're trying to teach and the examples are all about them, I think it's inappropriate. I don't think this is any different; it is not all about us. Just because somebody knows that I'm lesbian doesn't mean that every reference has to be a lesbian reference. Sometimes we joke around in meetings because there might be some reference to what people do on vacation and so somebody goes to a gay nude beach, okay; and people know and we can laugh about it and we go on and that's the end of that. I think there is something about this that has to do with the appropriateness of boundaries and knowing when we're the professional and when we are the person; and I don't always think those are the same thing. I've watch straight people negotiate the same thing; somebody's going through a divorce, do they talk about it all the time? No and if they did we'd think it's not right.

KG: So it's about appropriateness, relevancy?

Lily: Relevancy, context. I realize I'm sounding like a broken record on the boundary thing; but I have to tell you I see more mistakes and more

inappropriateness because people are not clear about boundaries. I see that mostly from administrative points of view. The principal that's going through a divorce that's talking in the faculty lounge; and I just think, "oh my God get a grip! You are the leader of the school; do you really think you ought to be in the faculty lounge talking about this man that you're divorcing?"

KG: Is that about maintaining a façade of being all about the business?

Lily: Yes, it is well it is. Now I'm saying I'm right; but I do believe this to my core and it is how I operate. It's not that you cannot have personal conversations; but I do not think because you are the leader of this school you can't hold court in the faculty lounge over your personal problems. I think it takes away from your leadership; because people may not want to hear how you just had a temper tantrum over something. Everybody deserves a safe space where they can go to that place; and people need to think about what's the appropriateness of that safe space.

KG: Do you think boundaries in general have become more blurred for everyone?

Lily: I do. I think it is unbelievable. I do and I do not know why.

KG: Alright is there anything that we haven't talked about in the last three interviews about your experiences setting the context what this all means that we haven't hit that you really feel like we need to talk about before we conclude?

Lily: I've been there 20 years. Yes I have my concerns and suspicions about stuff; but when you start asking me about other places I might want to work or would it be different if I went someplace else or if anybody did and I think about retiring and the fact that I'm going to want to keep doing something, it gives me pause because I don't think about [it]. I haven't thought about that life; and I do think my reputation precedes me. I do think that depending upon what I might try to do, I would have no doubt that I could walk into some places and within a day, it's all about me as the lesbian.

KG: Do you think [the district] is more accepting than you give them credit for?

Lily: Possibly.

KG: The community and the school district?

Lily: Possibly yes, because I do, I do carry wounds that are more personal in nature that I might be generalizing. And you know truthfully, some of mine are pretty specific in terms of the people involved. Maybe (laughing).

Participant Five (Brittany)

Interview One

KG: Why did you become a school administrator?

Brittany: I didn't intend on it. I just happened to be teaching and the person that was our HR Director kind of after we formed a relationship was like, "Wow, have you thought about leadership?" And I said, "Not really." And so she kind of pushed me and gave me a little nudge. And I started exploring leadership. And not that I wasn't a leadership leader in my position as a teacher because I think we have teacher leaders all over; but a more formal leadership, like education program and all that. Just started to see the big picture in schools; and I had that shift in perspective. And I just had a lot of energy around wanting to be a part of that and see beyond one classroom; and see it as a large classroom with adults and children.

Brittany: What your degree was in?

Brittany: It was in physical education and health, K-12; and I was teaching at the elementary level.

KG: How long did you teach?

Brittany: I taught 5 years total; but after 2 years of teaching, then I started taking leadership classes and my 3<sup>rd</sup> year teaching took over extended school year here in [this district] which is summer school. And they offer people who are exploring administration an opportunity to interview and possibly get that as an internship. I was working on my degree for administration; and I did that for 2 summers, maybe 3 total. And after my 5<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, an administrative intern position came open at [an elementary school in the district]; and that's the only elementary school that has, it was an assistant principal position and as a budget issue, they made it an intern position. So the current person that was there decided to leave; and I interviewed for that. And I stayed there for three years which was kind of the term limit for being able to stay. And an assistant principal position opened up here; and I just finished my second year here, starting my third.

KG: How old are you?

Brittany: I am 33.

KG: You're finishing up your doctorate?

Brittany: Hoping to, trying (laugh).

KG: Describe your leadership style.

Brittany: It really is built on the foundation of relationships. I really think that everyone has a major role that they play at our school on a daily basis. I try to determine what that role is and build on everyone's strengths here in the building. So it's very much the relationship and individual, their individual talents in terms of just how we work and play together. It's very much distributive leadership. I am not a person that will, I know a lot more with all these people surrounding me than I would alone; so I really try to share the responsibilities.

KG: Do you spend time outside of school with other school administrators?

Brittany: I do.

KG: Are they gay, straight combination?

Brittany: The school administrators that I spend time with outside of school are mostly, do happen to be gay.

KG: Are they within your district or spread around?

Brittany: Some within my district; but then some in other metro area districts.

KG: Do you spend much time at all with your heterosexual, straight administrator colleagues?

Brittany: Sometimes yeah, but I would say it's more weighted toward gay administrators just because I happen to I think have a deeper friendship with them just because I maybe knew them before they were school administrators. And so we had that relationship, and they just happen to be school administrators.

KG: When did you first realize that you were a lesbian?

Brittany: Probably 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I come from a really small community. I'm from [the southeast part of the state] and a town of 500 - so I mean really, there were no known gay people there in terms of open at the time. And I just like looking back, really think that that was probably the point that I realized it.

KG: What triggered those feelings?

Brittany: Just my desire. I just would look at who I wanted to spend time with - I mean it was all girls. And then actually there were some older girls who were out but from a different town who played, this is a stereotypical conversation (laugh), who played softball at [a nearby state university]. So I played softball and played on some summer select teams; and I was younger, they were older. And I was really just drawn to being around them, just like in proximity. There was just something about it.

KG: When did you first come out?

Brittany: Ninth grade, like to a small audience. I wouldn't say come out to just everybody; but to like a close circle of friends and actually began a relationship in 9<sup>th</sup> grade that lasted through my senior, actually lasted through my sophomore year in college.

KG: Did that audience include your family?

Brittany: Yes, that's kind of by accident though (laugh). My mom just overheard a conversation and then asked some probing questions about it. And I just told her everything; and actually it was received with much resistance. She said some really straightforward, kind of I would say harsh comments; it was almost like the way over the here I'm going to scare you out of this lifestyle. So interesting though because I look back and now I've had conversations with my mom - my mom actually had a relationship with a woman. And I think really part of her conversation with me was out of fear that I'm an only child, I have no siblings, so she's thinking I'm going to be alone. Just like the vision of I wouldn't have a family, she's not going to be a grandmother. So I think part of it was out of that; but I also think another part of it was out of that she was never able to be who she really was.

KG: Do you think she is?

Brittany: Yeah. I think she would definitely be with a woman at this point. My father actually passed away about 5 years ago; and they had an okay relationship. It was like what you were supposed to do; and she hasn't dated but she would certainly, "Oh yeah, I'll go to [the local lesbian bar] (laugh). I think that absolutely she would.

KG: Do you think she ever will?

Brittany: I don't know just because she doesn't put herself out there to connect - she doesn't put herself in the right places.

KG: Does she still live in that small town?

- Brittany: No, she's up here now. I don't know. I wish for her that she would, not like I would push her to do that, but I just wish for her that she would be happy with whoever it is because I really feel like that as I've gotten older and had more conversations with her, even though we haven't had a lot of direct conversation about it, I just know that she still wonders where that person is and there's still definitely a lot of emotion tied to that when we start talking about anything to do with that time period in her life. Because it was actually when I was in elementary school, a complex family (laugh); so the woman and her husband moved out of state.
- KG: So that's what ended the relationship?
- Brittany: I think neither one of their marriages were what I would call healthy; and not that it was super healthy to do that. But relationship, yeah I think that's what ended it was that she moved and the traditional perspective on what they were supposed to do, because it was still in the 1980s - early 80s to mid 80s. And they're a different generation.
- KG: Do you talk about the way she reacted and how that affected you or have you just let it go?
- Brittany: No, I've worked through that myself. It impacted me like momentarily when it all happened; but I was kind of like, you know what I'm so happy (laugh). I know this is what's right for me; I never had a doubt about it. And I have been able to process all that and reflect on all that myself; and make that kind of sense that I just explained to you out of it. So I kind of I understand - now if she would not be accepting of my family now, that would be hurtful; but she has like way turned the corner and did so rather quickly. I think a big turning point with her was when she realized that people knew about it and they weren't like egging our house or they would still choose to talk to me. I do think when you're in a town like that size that you're parents would think, "What have I done?" Maybe the parents would think that but other people wouldn't. They'd wonder that other people would think, "How did you fail her as a parent that would cause to want to have this crazy behavior (laugh)?"
- KG: When did your circle expand of people who knew?
- Brittany: I slowly expanded throughout high school; and I would say people in like towns further knew more than people who I spent every day with in terms of really expanding the circle.
- KG: So you felt more comfortable maybe being more out further away?

Brittany: Because there were people out in those places; so when we went to [a larger nearby city], people knew but it was really only with gay people at that time.

KG: Did you go to college?

Brittany: I went to [a junior college in the area], played softball, right away and people knew there.

KG: Did you tell them or how did they know?

Brittany: I was just open about my girlfriend; she would come there and visit and stay at the house. And so it was just like, "Oh, [my girlfriend's] coming over." (laugh) And I lived in a house with 9 girls and no one else in that whole house was out; it was interesting. But people there that I thought were, had just never acted upon it. And now they are, they have; and actually, one of the people that I lived with, actually the only backlash that I had from that whole house was a person who started talking to me about bible quotes and things. And I was like in my head going. "Really?" So she was really negative about it - it's so interesting because now she has a partner.

KG: So you're in education, you're hired [in this district] first so you spent your whole career in [this district], so you enter the profession are you out?

Brittany: So I enter the profession, I go to teach at [an elementary school] and had no formal conversations about it; but I always had decided that I was going to be open about... Initially I wouldn't say, "Oh my partner [Kelly]." Or talk about us as being a couple; but I was always very open about who I spent my weekends with. I had made that decision that if people asked me, because I would want them to be honest, that I was going to be honest. But I wouldn't put a lot of information out there that someone might not want to know; I figured they (inaud) talk to me and infer that was kind of my initial position.

KG: You're teaching and administrative career with the same partner?

Brittany: [Yes] within one month of starting teaching, yes. They would say, "What did you do this weekend?" There was a mixed age group, so I came in with a couple of new teachers and there were teachers that had been there twenty something years; so a very diverse group. And regardless of who I was talking with, I was always open about... If they asked me about my weekend, "Well [Kelly] and I did this." But it never, I never said anything about our relationship - I just talked about who I spent my time with.

KG: When you talked about that, did you primarily reference [Kelly] or did you reference a group or...?

Brittany: I primarily referenced [Kelly]. Sure I would say, "Oh this group or whatever..." But a lot of it was just about [Kelly] and I, [Kelly] and myself.

KG: Alright were you living together at that time?

Brittany: We were not living together right at the start of school but shortly thereafter.

KG: How long did it take for people to figure it out?

Brittany: Well, I was there probably a year. My direct teaching partner then, I don't remember how I told her. But just in conversation I ended up telling her - specifically because we team together every day. But then she did not share that out with the group; and what happened was [Kelly] and I continued to date. I would bring her to school stuff even over time.

KG: School stuff like happy hours or school stuff like school functions where parents and teachers and other teachers and kids were?

Brittany: All of the above. And then actually she gave me a ring; and it was so out of the blue. We hadn't talked about having a ceremony or getting married; but we had been together a little over a year, maybe a year and a half. And she gave me a ring - she went out of town traveling and come back and gave me this ring. So she said, "Well, what are you going to say at school tomorrow?" And I was like, "Nobody's going to notice (laugh)." Me, a person who doesn't pay attention to people having wedding rings on, didn't realize that women are all over that. So of course, I had my ring on and she's like, "What are you going to say? And I was like, "I don't know I mean really who's going to ask?" Honest to goodness about the second hour of the day, someone looked at me and said, "Oh my gosh! Are you and [Kelly] getting married?" And I said, "Well I guess you would call it either that or a ceremony or I'm not sure what that the politically correct term is." And that was all that happened. That opened the conversation and then throughout that whole day all my colleagues were coming up and saying, "Congratulations, I heard the news." And I mean it was really like surreal.

KG: That's amazing any backlash? (headshake no) If it was they kept it underground?

Brittany: If it was, they kept it underground. And I had an amazing principal who, we did this [staff newsletter], and he actually said, that was when that



whole civil union conversation was coming up. This was like 9 years ago, so there was all this talk about civil unions and the gay marriage and all that it's just like there. It happened at a time period when that was at the front of the news; and so anyway in the [this newsletter] he put "Congratulations to [Kelly] and Brittany who are going to be embarking on this civil union."

KG: So what's the [the newsletter]?

Brittany: It goes to staff not parents. They have a surprise wedding shower where they invite [Kelly].

KG: How did you feel about that?

Brittany: It was interesting. I'm like a very outgoing person; but I don't like being the center of attention for those kinds of things. But of course I'm thinking, "Wow! These people have totally embraced us the least I can do is participate in this." And they had gifts and cake.

KG: Where do students fall in there?

Brittany: I had not had conversations with students about our relationship and what the significance of it was; but they knew [Kelly] because they knew her from being at school events. So someone would say, "Where's your friend Miss [Kelly]?" That was about the maximum conversation with students - families knew and I just left it up to them to choose what...

KG: How did families know?

Brittany: It's [a small district]. There are lots of teachers that live in the community who have friends who live here.

KG: How did you know they knew?

Brittany: "Congratulations. I'm happy for you guys." Those kinds of comments; and then [Kelly] would volunteer at stuff and they would say, "Do you guys want to go have a drink?" or "What are you guys doing? Do you want to..." Then there became some friendships out of having worked with their children; and we just developed relationship out of that. And so some of those families did actually tell their children; now those children are, well for example, there's one family that was from my original school that we're friends with. And they've asked me to, I used to watch their kids when they went out of town. And so, they just told their children so they knew in elementary school that Miss [Kelly] is my special friend; but now they know more about the dynamics of our relationship. And for a lot of parents, they had conversations with their children once we had kids

because it was kind of like, “Ms. [Brittany] has kids now.” And so, some of those kids are older, they’re like late middle school/high school; so they’re old enough to have that conversation and level of understanding.

KG: Did people ask or did you just introduce [Kelly] when she came to school or how did that work? With kids?

Brittany: When she came to school and people would say, “Who’s this?” “This is my friend Miss [Kelly].” Or actually I would say, “This is my friend [Kelly].” And they would just take it at that.

KG: How did it feel when you introduced here as your friend?

Brittany: I would have loved to have been more honest; but I just wasn’t sure they were ready for that and not knowing their parents’ viewpoints on it. So I thought that was the most honest way that would not create waves. So yeah, it bothered me; but I just didn’t want to open up that conversation for the kids and their families if they weren’t at a place where they were ready to tackle that.

KG: So if they ever wanted to know, they could ask and or infer but you weren’t necessarily ready to say to them this is my girlfriend, this is my partner?

Brittany: To kids? No. And I still didn’t even at [the next elementary school]. I just left there two years ago and some of the kids knew because I grew close to their families; but I never would introduce her as my partner. And a lot of times, I actually just said, “this is [Kelly]” because I just thought, “Okay, that is really honest, ‘this is [Kelly].’” And then if they would say, “Well who is it? Who is she?” And I would say, “Oh one of my friend” or “one of my friends.”

KG: Do you live in [this community]?

Brittany: No.

KG: So in your community where you live, how out are you?

Brittany: Verbally? Very. Physically? Not a lot, but I’m not a public display of affection person. I guess there is a little difference like we’re going to Vegas next weekend, so I would hold [Kelly]’s hand there. But she’s not as comfortable - she wouldn’t be as comfortable being physical in [our community]. There’s not really a lot of places to hang out; but to walk down the street and hold hands that would be a level of discomfort for her. I would be comfortable with it; so we go to Vegas next weekend, she’ll be comfortable with it so we would do it.

KG: So it's okay, it's more her discomfort than it is yours?

Brittany: [Yes.]

KG: What about in this area as far as when you're in your school community?

Brittany: Would I give her a hug out in public? Yeah.

KG: So if she dropped you off at work, would you give her hug and a kiss in the parking lot?

Brittany: I'd give her a hug - I wouldn't give her a kiss. But if she comes in the office before she leaves, I'll always I walk her out and say, "See you later. Have a good day. I love you."

KG: And give her a hug at that point?

Brittany: [Yes.] It's like automatic - I haven't even thought about it (both laughing). I'm very, it might be different if I wasn't a very huggie person; but it's just my nature. So I don't think anything - I guess I hadn't really thought about people's perception of that or how they could, like how it's different with her versus different with...

KG: So you're here now, you're out, did they just know you were out? It just came with you?

Brittany: Yes; and actually at my last school, I was shocked it didn't just come with me even though it was in [this district]. Because I was operating with the assumption of that everybody had to know - it's [this district], really it's small. And at my last school, when I transitioned there, I actually worked with a principal who is gay. But it's interesting because he wasn't really out there; he's one of those, he's out but it's a different generation. He's out more than he was out at the time, more than he thought he was (laugh). And he had been there for a couple of years and wasn't really out. I just thought people knew about me coming from across the district; and one of my first days I was having lunch with different teams and someone said, "So tell me about your husband." Because I had my ring on and I was like, "Wow, well I can't tell you about my, I don't have a husband to tell you about but I'd love to tell you about [Kelly]." And it was just like so spur of the moment; and I wasn't even like ready for that question. But I was like, "Oh I need to make them feel like it's not something different though." So right away, I said, "You know what I can't tell you about my husband because I don't have one; but I'd love to tell you about [Kelly]."

KG: And how was that received?

Brittany: “Well tell us more, we’d love to hear about [Kelly].”

KG: Did his level of outness affect your comfort with being out in that building?

Brittany: No, I saw him as being in a different generation. I really think that makes a big difference. I just think I was, I am fortunate to be a part of life right now, to be able to be open about my family and my relationship. And so I think there’s a lot to be fearful of earlier on.

KG: Do you think your level of outness made him either become more out or uncomfortable or?

Brittany: He came out.

KG: He did? Do you think you helped him through that process?

Brittany: I think I did. I think I was like the lab rat - these people are accepting of you so I’m going to throw it out there. He has been in public education for twenty something years. And we just talked about it a little bit; and finally one day at, we were having some kind of end of the year and he stood up at a staff meeting and said something about, “Next year I’m going to have my, I’m going to have you guys at our house, that would be my partner and myself, at our house for our welcome back party for school and I’m not going to take our pictures down.” And he started crying. And it was like the receiving line at the end of the staff meeting of people just hugging him because I think they knew. And they really wanted, they felt that that was a big barrier in their relationship. Because maybe they don’t understand how I understand it being a person that’s in a similar situation or at least to the level that I can potentially understand it. Because they’re going, “Gosh, we just love him for who he is.” They felt like it was a sign of him not being as close to them I think. I think they thought it was more about them than about him.

KG: Are you out to parents here?

Brittany: In terms of staff, it just came with me because there are people here I worked with I that transitioned kids to kindergarten. So they knew me through that - they knew [Kelly] and myself and we had [our daughter]. And at the time, she was pregnant with the twins right when I started this job here; so that month, I had to end up taking off because the twins were born. So in terms of parents, they just learned through her being around again and through seeing her here with our kids.

KG: Are you out at your kid’s school?

Brittany: We just went in and said, “We’re \*\*\*’s parents.” And actually, I was actually comfortable because I knew a person who started working out there when [our daughter] was making that transition. And so I think that helped us to just be more...

KG: Do you think your level of comfort with being out makes them comfortable with you being out?

Brittany: Absolutely. [Kelly] and I have different perspectives on this because she is in the corporate world. And she’s in sales and feels like that her competitors could potentially utilize that information against her even though her boss knows we live together. But I try to tell her that I think sometimes her being more secretive about it causes them to be more suspicious about it. And I always telling her that sometimes we give people cause to believe that it’s wrong because we’re not okay with it ourselves; and so that’s been my biggest I guess belief for just being so open. It’s like if I’m okay with it, I think most other people will be okay with it.

KG: Does it bother you that she’s not out as out at work?

Brittany: It bothers me for her because I just personally think of one of the biggest gifts of my whole life is being able to be myself - whether it’s here, whether it’s in [by my house], whether it’s in [the city], whether it’s in Las Vegas. That I get the opportunity to be who I am outwardly no matter where I am and no matter who I’m spending time with... So I know how much I love when people ask about our family and I love to talk about [Kelly]; and I can’t imagine all that taken away. So I think for me, it bothers me more for her that she doesn’t have that same opportunity or hasn’t been able to create that I don’t know same surrounding environment. But I’m not like upset that people don’t know about me; so it’s not like I think that, it’s just the fact that she can’t be herself.

KG: Are there things that you do or don’t do clothing wise, hair, appearance because you don’t want to be perceived in this particular way?

Brittany: I could not have fit the stereotype more - PE teacher, my hair is like short as stitches, and I drove a Jeep. It’s like when I worked at my first school; but I will cut my hair very short if I want. Here I just happen to be growing it out right now. It’s funny because I actually had this one moment last week, I have this American Eagle shirt that’s kind of plaid and a little bit borderline westernize. And it’s funny because I laughed at myself that morning I’m like, “I’m going to have gay day at work.” Like I was laughing thinking about this. So I get to work and I wear it. And I actually have one teacher who’s really, she and I have a lot of conversations. She’s kind of intrigued by, she wants to have stronger

connection. So she's always watching all these shows on lesbians and the continuum of lipstick lesbian and all this stuff. So of course I came into my secretary and I said, "Oh \*\*\*, darn it I forgot to tell you that it's gay day here." She's like, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "Look at my shirt - don't you like?" She's like, "I don't even get it. I think that's really cute." I guess if I were to look at it, it is like more if you're getting a western shirt it was more on the feminine side - it came from the girl's section. Anyway from my perspective - so about an hour later I am sitting in my office and this teacher comes in and she's very out there with her comments. And we have an open relationship and she's like, "Oh really in touch with yourself today huh (laugh)?" I was like, "Yeah, I had to feel like close to my people." So I mean I wouldn't avoid wearing it; oh and I said, "Yeah and I don't have anything flannel like nothing from high school fits me so (laugh) so I was like I couldn't really pull that out for you." That's what I said to her - we just laughed. But I pretty much wear, now I don't know I wouldn't wear something with a slogan on it that people could find offensive; but if I wanted to wear my Melissa Etheridge t-shirt to work I would.

KG: Do you think about it?

Brittany: I don't but I did about that actually. And I have to say, that's the only, it's so interesting that that happened last week because that's the only time that I would probably say in the last 5 years that I've even thought about like, "Oh I'm looking gay (laugh)!"

KG: Do you have a lot of out staff here or staff that identify as gay or lesbian?

Brittany: One person. I have had comments from people that have worked with the person over time and she's never really been out until I came; and so I think it's another one of those situations different generation. I should say, she's out to like a small like two people, couple of people; but now she'll talk openly about her partner. And she's even had a conversation with me about this new level of comfort for her. So I feel that's another reason why I feel compelled to just continue to be myself; because if it can have any kind of impact in making indirectly someone else opening a door for them to be more comfortable in being themselves.

KG: Do you have same-sex families here or?

Brittany: We have a couple.

KG: What do your interactions with them look like? Do they know?

Brittany: Yeah, they know I think. It's just with any other family; but I think there's just more of a level of comfort kind of. Like I said when I was going to

[our children's school district] that I knew that someone on the administrative team that was going to work with me on the transition, it was kind of just I don't, I can't even describe how.

KG: Do you think it's important for our families have opportunities to work with gay or lesbian administrators? Do you think that it provides them a safety or security?

Brittany: I do. I think there's a lot of fear around just how that impacts my child and will he or she receive the same opportunities in the same... I still think that there's a possibility for a lot of prejudice.

KG: Did it change for you when you had kids, your willingness to be out your need to be out?

Brittany: No, I mean I think it's been the same over time. I don't think I'm more out or less out as a result of having kids.

KG: Did the kids put you out there more?

Brittany: I didn't carry.

KG: When you're carrying a child it gives people the freedom to ask people whatever you want they think?

Brittany: I think actually not carrying put me more out there only because they heard I was having a child. Because then if I had just been carrying the child they would have been like, "How far along are you?" But they're knowing that I'm expecting a child but I'm not carrying the child.

KG: Did they ask?

Brittany: Yeah. They would say, "So are you adopting?" And I would say, "Actually, I am. My partner's carrying the children and I eventually will be formally adopting them."

KG: Did they throw you a shower?

Brittany: Yes. Yeah they actually threw a shower for [our oldest daughter]; and then it was a huge surprise, invited her up. And then when, actually she was pregnant with the twins and due in July and I transitioned here for my new job that started July 1<sup>st</sup> - so the last week of school for the twins they had this diaper shower where all throughout the day people brought me diapers. And we had enough diapers for like the first 6 months - so they're very generous.

KG: You said your partner attends school functions, does she attend also if you have an adult function at a school?

Brittany: [Yes] like the Foundation Dinner.

KG: She attends that as your partner?

Brittany: [Yes.] And people in the, there are a lot of community people there, it's very community-orientated - it's about connecting with the community.

KG: Do you introduce her as your partner?

Brittany: [Yes], because there are no kids involved. There are kids involved but there are no kids there to hear; so their parents can choose to do what they want with it.

KG: How have those community members involved in that event reacted?

Brittany: "Glad to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you." The board members, because they know, they're like, "Oh it's nice to meet you; I'm glad you could come and be (inaud)." At least face to face interaction has been positive.

KG: You hear about [this district] and you hear about how conservative this community is and how unaccepting at times and that's not the experience that you've shared. Do you think it's underground or do you think it's just a perception that maybe isn't accurate?

Brittany: I think there's probably some underground. There's probably some people who struggle with it; but they haven't communicated that with me. But then I also think that probably part of that perception is inaccurate just because there are a lot of people in [this district] who are.

KG: You're way over your 10%?

Brittany: I even remember actually [one of our assistant superintendent's who is a lesbian], this was years ago so I barely even knew her, saying "This is unbelievable." This was right after I had, and I didn't really get that it was unbelievable at that time I didn't even get that it was unbelievable at the time because it was just my life. I don't think if I actually realized how it could have actually taken a different road, I might not have been so... But I think I just didn't even think about that. So one day I happened to be at central office and she's just like, "Hey I heard that [your school] threw a shower for you and [Kelly] to celebrate your civil union - that's unbelievable." And I still remember that day I was kind of like, "Yeah, They're really nice people." I didn't say that out loud, I was like, "Yeah, I



know I am so fortunate.” I got that I was fortunate; but I don’t think I really got it - now I really get it.

KG: Why do you really get it now?

Brittany: Just because [I] realize that hearing other people’s stories it can be really different; and seeing other people struggle that it can be really different. And so for me, it’s actually going to be hard for me to venture out of [this district] I think. I won’t make any shift at the cost of losing this piece of being able to be open and be able to be honest about my family.

KG: Do you think that openness and honesty here will affect you working, getting a job somewhere else?

Brittany: I don’t know; I hadn’t thought about that. I’m not going to live in fear. But I would hope that they would really look at my job performance and make decisions based on that; but I know there’s a possibility that they might think about it differently. But I guess I would say that I wouldn’t want to work there anyway.

KG: Lots of pictures with your partner - so any qualms about putting that stuff out there?

Brittany: No.

KG: When was the first time you displayed a picture of you and your partner?

Brittany: When I was teaching at [my first school] - when we had our civil union. I really didn’t have any pictures, so it wasn’t like I put up my parents, it wasn’t like I excluded her and put up other pictures. I just didn’t have anything out. But I would have a screen saver on my computer or something like we went on a trip and there it was. And I put pictures up here because she’s like, “I want to be in your office.” But I really didn’t ever put any pictures.

KG: So after your civil union you put pictures up at [your school]?

Brittany: I had them up before - I had my screen saver up before that.

KG: Is there anything you won’t put up?

Brittany: No. I wouldn’t make a different decision about something I would put up here versus something I would put up at home.

KG: There’s no thought, there’s no checklist or anything - if you want it up you put it up?

Brittany: I'm realizing how lucky I am through this conversation - I'm like going all of these things I don't think about.

KG: Do you think that if you were someone else it would be different they would receive you differently? If you were more introverted or stand-offish?

Brittany: Maybe because [Kelly]'s a little more introverted and I think that's why she struggles some. And she'll say things, this is not now but earlier like when I would share with people, she's like "You just make it so easy." I'm thinking about all these different possible checklists you've asked me about this morning and if I had to like filter through all that while I was having a conversation with someone even though I feel like I'm outgoing, that would hinder my conversation because I would always be with you but not with you because I'm thinking about maybe what I shouldn't say.

KG: In your experiences, how do your different identities school administrator lesbian, how do they interact or influence one another?

Brittany: I think they're just come together as part of who I am. I don't really think that being a school administrator changes my lesbian behavior, conversation, relationship; and I don't think really being lesbian has changed my school administrator experience or role. I guess with the exception though, I think like you just talked about the connection that exists with families who are of the same-sex. I'm very open to everyone's story; I really try to listen for who they are and I really try to have meaningful relationships with them because I want them to get to know me and I want to get to know them. Because I think a lot times that there are people out there who just haven't had an opportunity to meet someone who has an alternative lifestyle or who happens to be lesbian/gay. And they have those stereotypes; and so I want to have an authentic relationship with them. And I really I think it's actually. I think it's helped me to have more open and honest conversations with people because they feel we have a close relationship because they just happen to know about who I am. They feel like I really trust them.

KG: Do they ask you things that they probably wouldn't ask someone else? Do you find yourself being the queer information provider?

Brittany: The most information is around just our children and how do we make that decision. Do we have any fears around them; and how do you pick the donor. Just those different experiences that they may not have had in their own lives and they might have wondered about for other people, they will come to me and say talk to me about this. Or because they feel like we can talk about anything. So I guess it has impacted just my level of relationships with people.

KG: Do you feel like you can and you're okay with it being able to talk about what it means to be a lesbian and what it means to be a lesbian school administrator in your school district and how that impacts, how the decisions that are made here impact you?

Brittany: I can be a spokesperson for how it has impacted me personally; but I wouldn't feel comfortable being the spokesperson for everyone because I see that people are during different time periods. So maybe how it's impacted [an older lesbian school administrator in the district] is way different than my journey. We just have different journeys; even though we have that commonality, there's a time factor. There's who's your colleague factor. Just who are you and what does that bring to the situation. So I would be a spokesperson about how this has been a great place for me to work as a lesbian; and I feel that they have honored me for who I am and created a safe working environment and allowed me the same opportunity as anyone else; but I don't feel like I could say that about everyone's story.

KG: Are there things that they could do better to support you?

Brittany: I think there's one piece that every year it goes out there, the partner benefits. And that's not about, I mean that's the only thing I can think of which is a really great problem because I feel incredibly supported in every way with my family with just my work here and the level of professional trust that exists. But I think that that's a little like salt in the wound for people who have partners; that kind of goes to the board and they're just not ready. Even just putting same-sex in like the anti-discrimination policy language; it's not there. And just so that's what goes to the board, but then the whole possibility of having partner benefits and just access to those things. But really, that's the biggest I have - I feel lucky that that's the biggest issue. I feel incredibly supported.

## Interview Two

KG: What does your typical day look like as a school administrator?

Brittany: I actually cover staffing for our building - I can get calls like starting after midnight all the way up until 6:30am regarding staff members out. I typically call in or email or get her before 6:30am to start kind of putting the puzzle of who's going to be the best fit for what kids today based on who we have out. And then after staffing is situated, my door is open; and I'm usually out and about in the hallways but my door's open so if staff members want to come in. When people arrive, we have staggered staff so they arrive at 6:30am, 7:00am, 7:30am and then some at 8:00am. So I try to be out and about during those kind of what I say arrival times, arrival of the masses, so that I can just have a touch base and say "hi" - just more for

relationship building. Then our parent wave, I try to make myself visible and be out and about. I try to visit classrooms in the morning a lot because that's our primary learning block; so just being out in the classrooms and spending time observing and partnering with teachers. And then at 11:30am, our half day classes get picked up and so I try to be out here because we have a lot of traffic in and out of our parking lot at that time. And then lunch, so pop in the teacher's lounge see how everything's going (laugh). I try to do that just so it's not a scary, to keep it from being a scary place, just so that we can continue to have open conversations; but absolutely can be a scary place but I'm like face the fears just go in (laugh). I do feel like that the lounge can really impact climate for the adults, which also impacts climate for the kids; so that's why I pop in there frequently. In the afternoon, we get kiddos coming in at 12:30pm again. So that's another high traffic time and pretty much the whole afternoon from 1:00pm to 3:00pm, my time is utilized to either do problem solving meetings with teaching teams, be a part of their team planning like listen in, or staff development. So we really use the afternoon blocks of time for that and on each day of the week, there's an age level that's signed a problem solving time or a team planning time and that's from 1:00pm to 3:00pm. Then I typically go home, like my normal hours are getting here around 6:00am and I leave around a little after 3:00pm; but that shifts depending on if we have any school wide events or that kind of thing.

KG: Do you work at home at all?

Brittany: I do work at home. I think the Blackberry is a good thing and a bad thing; I do work from home more in terms of just communication stuff. Some school improvement stuff, like if I need to do updates or those big school things, I have young kids so a lot of the things that take intense focus, I make sure I work on here whether it's getting here early or extending my day around my family's schedule. But in terms of communication, I absolutely am accessible.

KG: Is [Kelly] ever just like put it down?

Brittany: Well, we're two Blackberry - she has a lot of communication on a daily basis. And so we both kind of have those personalities that it drives you crazy if there's something you need to do; so it's better to just do it and be done with it instead of think about it. We have had to establish norms within our relationship - it's non-Blackberry time. Because I will give you my total attention, I will give people here my total attention; but at home I feel like I can multi-task. So I'm that ta da da da da while she's talking sometimes; at that point we both have rights to say, "It's non-Blackberry time." And we know that, so we just remind each other.

KG: What is it like to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian?

Brittany: It's hard for me to know any different - it is part of who I am. I guess I try to, when I meet people, I hope that's not my first criteria of being identified as like oh the lesbian (laugh). I'm not saying it's a bad thing, I'm very proud of who I am and my family and just where I am in life; but I just hope that that's not my... How it's like people first language, so I hope it's not like my daughter who has Autism, the Autistic child - I don't want to that to be not that either of those things are negative, it's just a part of who you are but I don't want to be my first identifier.

KG: So you don't want it to be your first identifier, I totally get that, do you think that living as out as you do makes it your first identifier?

Brittany: Sometimes it does, I don't think so much anymore because now there aren't a lot of new people. When people are slowly infused into the district and they happen to find out because they ask about my family; but I think probably at first, it was right up there with the top identifiers of who I am because it was just more unusual to be that out in school. So yeah and I just really don't want people to think by saying that I don't want it to be interpreted as negative but I'm more than lesbian. That is one of my identities and I'm very proud of it; but I just don't want it to be the only thing. Because I think for those people who are maybe more closed minded or feel very different about the lifestyle, if that's my only identifier then I never get a professional relationship with them beyond that. And I haven't had that happen to an awareness that I know about - it could have before with people. And I know we talked last time about if I were to open doors outside of [this district], do I think that this could be an obstacle or a roadblock for me getting a job? And I said that maybe but I don't want to work there anyway - so I guess I just wouldn't want someone to avoid getting to know more of who I am on a professional level because of something they might have disagreed with even though I think I can't separate it out personally and professionally for them. It could be a personal, I could definitely be all business with them and if they don't want to hear about my family.

KG: Do you think if you were more closeted or not living as out as you do, do you think then it does become your only identity if people know but you're not talking about it more so than if you're just integrating it into every aspect of who you are?

Brittany: Sometimes yes. Yes like I said, I think it takes some of the mystery away and some of the... I think there are a lot of sidebar conversations that go on about people wondering; and then they make assumptions and then they have speculations that are way more crazy than anything that's actually going on in your life. I think part of them knowing demystifies

some of that. And I've thought more about some of the questions you asked me last time; and I have actually, when I started working in the district team taught with someone who happened to be a lesbian and wasn't out - generational issue. And also, she thought I was absolutely crazy; and here we are here in the same learning community. And these people are having a shower for me, this wasn't like day one but play it out over time; and she had been there for a really long time and ended up leaving shortly after I arrived to go be an assistant principal where I used to work. She left and now she's left the state; but she just never was really out. And it was just another example of people going, "Gosh I wish [she] would just tell me." And they would come to me and say that. I think whether it's an administrative position or a peer position that people just want to know - like they already know so I mean it's just they talked a lot more about it because she didn't talk about it.

KG: Do you think that the generations that are kind of ahead of us think that we're a little too nonchalant, a little too risky in our behavior living as out as we do?

Brittany: I think there's some people who are older than us who say, "I wish I could do that." Or "I wish I wouldn't have had to wait this long to be able to do that and celebrate who I am." I think there are people who are on that continuum going, "Not in a million years it doesn't matter if I'm the only lesbian left in the whole school I'm not putting it out there because that one person who disagrees with it could use that against me." I think there's just a lot, an immense amount of fear about it still for some people. So I just think it's a continuum; and I think some people probably don't agree with me - they have a problem with it because it is more private and it's a continuum.

KG: Can you describe some of the ways your sexual orientation impacts your professional relationships with other administrators?

Brittany: I think there's more of an openness for potential conversation that's not even related to my lifestyle. But I think because I have been more open, this is how it impacts it in a positive way from my perception - because I have been more open and they choose to be more open with me with things that are not related to my sexual orientation but just maybe aspects of their life that it just takes our relationship to a different level for some people. For some people it doesn't matter, but for some people I think that we have more personal interactions or conversation that maybe wouldn't have been a part of our relationship before.

KG: Are there negative effects of your sexual orientation on those relationships or have you experienced that at all?

Brittany: I haven't; but like I said, if it's happening it's things that I'm not aware of. So maybe my relationships could be more rich with some people than they are. I don't feel like, I feel like I have a positive relationship. I'm kind of Pollyanna sometimes, I feel like I have a positive relationship with administrators that I work with from Pre-K to 12. Some of them I've known for a longer period of time, some people are new; but I can't really tell how the relationship would be different in a negative way if they knew or didn't know. It's not blatant, it's not; but I also work with a lot of administrators who are [gay]. Sometimes I wonder if people would, they might feel differently about it but they might not say anything because it's not like I'm the only person. I haven't had negative interactions from the community that I'm aware of that has been confrontational; but then I just really reflected on that and it's like who are they going to go to? There are people in the district that are in positions of power. politically there are residents that are in positions of power that I think other people might not agree with it; but they're not as outward about it because it's like who do you go to? Who do you take those things to? And it could impact their relationship with people in positions of power.

KG: Not an avenue or an approved avenue to voice opinions negative opinions about sexuality?

Brittany: I guess there are avenues; but it's not as easy as it would be other places.

KG: Because there are so many of us in your administrative positions?

Brittany: And then so many people who are heterosexual people who are connected to that serve as allies, the social justice and just those dynamics.

KG: What about with staff your staff?

Brittany: I think their perception is that I trust them more because I share my life with them (laugh); but they don't really know that I share, I do trust them I'm not trying to say that, but they don't really know I just share my life with anyone.

KG: But they kind of think that you do because not many other people have?

Brittany: Yes. For a lot of people, I am the only gay person that they like have in their life on a...

KG: Day to day basis?

Brittany: Yeah, which sometimes that does kind of stress me out.

KG: Does it?

- Brittany: I don't want to say anything that would cause them to think that all gay people are like this because I don't want to be a bad representative. I don't want them to assume that... It's kind of like the people that go to the Pride parade and they don't know anyone else so because what they see on that given day or what they hear, they just generalize that. So part of it, I want them to know that's just who I am; and I'm not trying to be like the person saying this is what all gay people do.
- KG: Do you find that you try to combat the stereotypes that are out there or do you just go with whatever and you just live your life?
- Brittany: I will plant little seeds about it because sometimes like I think, I told you about that shirt and I said, "Oh it's gay day" and all that. So I think if I'll plant some seeds. If someone says something, it's always joking actually - I'm probably the biggest person that jokes about it.
- KG: Do you use humor to make people more comfortable?
- Brittany: I use humor. I use humor to make people more comfortable; and I use humor as an avenue for then being able to shift. "Yeah, let's totally think about this, every gay person I know wears flannels and a shirt western looking shirts. Really? Do you really think that's true?" It's more like I'm not confronting them I'm more thinking out loud.
- KG: You're educating them through a way that's not really directly educating them?
- Brittany: Not threatening, I never want to like make them feel uncomfortable about something they might say. And I frankly want them to continue to bring stuff to me so that I can, even if it's looking like I'm poking fun at myself, using that to help them understand the bigger... That is kind of stressful - if I stop and think about it, a lot of times I'm just a do-er and then I reflect five steps later and go oh. So when I think about that, that if I am the only person who has a sexual orientation different from them in their life and you look at all these different people that come in and out of here that makes me... Because I want them to have a positive perception of non-traditional relationships families, some of those things that they don't, not they don't but people in general think that there's no commitment, we're going to teach [our son] to be gay - so I try through conversations to really help them to see it differently.
- KG: What about with students?
- Brittany: I've had some of my former students who come back and know and ask about my kids and ask about my friend [Kelly]. Who know that she and I are parenting together, are together; but they're like in high school now.



KG: What about with families?

Brittany: I think some people who are in non-traditional families feel comfortable - it gives them a sense of security to know that their child... I guess it's more like for them to feel like their child is not going to be treated differently because of their relationship with their significant other. I also do think that for some families though that want to have a relationship with the people that work at the school, they think we're closer because they know. They always, they'll ask, "How's [Kelly] doing?" Right like the whole kind of thing I just talked with you about the staff - I think they think that it's a sign of the depth of our relationship that I'll talk with them about my family; but I think it's just because so many people don't. It's nothing that I really do differently; it's just how they perceive the situation.

KG: How do you answer or otherwise answer direct and indirect questions about your sexuality?

Brittany: I don't think people really ever said.

KG: Do you think that's because you don't hide it?

Brittany: Yeah, I think it's because it is what it is and they know. So there aren't questions to be asked about it or there aren't like questions that get them something that they want to know. More they just say, "What about this or...?" I mean I'll pretty much answer anything if it's a question that's not really, really private.

KG: Do you get do people ask you really, really private questions?

Brittany: No, if they're talking about their husbands or whatever they'll put something out there about to include me. So they'll make comments and I'll just laugh because they're not, I see that more as inclusiveness. Like they are looking, thinking maybe I might feel excluded if... The most questions I get are not so intimate but they're more about partnering with another woman. And they start talking about their husband or what their husband doesn't do and they go to, "Yeah well maybe I should have been with another woman." It's more of those conversations that are examining their relationship and then being curious about the dynamics of my relationship. And I have to remind them that we both have periods - so just like I throw joking things out there like that, how we can be really emotional together and use humor to kind of let them see the other side. Let's see I'm trying to think what personal questions. The most personal questions I had actually when we were trying to conceive and had start our family - that generates a lot of thinking on behalf of other people. So in terms of crossing into a more personal threshold that was the point that

people were more inquiring about the turkey baster. I'm like, "If only it were that easy." Then they would say, "Oh my gosh! Really you have to pick out a donor and it's that detailed?" And I would laugh initially and then take that opportunity to put some information out there to help them better understand. And also say some people do that at home, some people can, I've known friends that have tried to conceive at home without going to the doctor's office but I think turkey baster's nowhere in there (laugh) let me tell you that. So helping them to just understand a little more about processes.

KG: Have you seen or have you experienced how lesbian experiences have been included or excluded in your professional career?

Brittany: We had a shower to celebrate our civil union. They had a shower to celebrate the birth of our first daughter and then a celebration and diaper shower to celebrate the twins' arrival. People around here have an awareness; they make note of when it's our anniversary. They know [Kelly] and I are going out of town this weekend, so 50 people will tell me to have great time. And they'll all ask when I come back, "So did [Kelly] have fun? Did you have fun?" Just on a more day to day basis, I feel like my family's been included or is thought of just like I would ask how their family trip went.

KG: Do you think that you're more likely to be included if you're willing to put yourself out there?

Brittany: [Yes] because people have more comfort talking about it because they're not going, "Should I talk with her about them or should I not?" So I think that sets the table.

KG: There's probably that whole question of if you're having a union or you're having a child with a partner and you're not out there then that puts people in a predicament?

Brittany: How would she handle it if she doesn't even really want us to know but we know but we want to celebrate her. I mean there's none of that. It was like a landmark thing this year from my relationship perspective and to watch [Kelly] see this and be a part of this was really great. They have an annual Foundation Dinner which is like all of the people in the community who come and pay - it's like an evening on the town. And this year when the envelope came it said, Brittany and [Kelly] on the envelope. So before it always just said my name; so whoever did the envelopes this year... And [Kelly] would be like, "I don't know if I should go." I would not go to her work function because she doesn't have that level of relationship kind of outness. But I was in reflecting thought about that and for her that was a really big deal to have her name on the envelope - that this is

coming from someone who is addressing these envelopes, who is not an employee of the district had enough awareness. And so what I did was back tracked to figure out who did the envelopes to call those people and leave them a personal message about their level of thoughtfulness and inclusiveness. I mean for to see her, there was no question then she was going for sure this year. I mean like she felt like, "Wow they want me to be there." So it was really powerful. She called me and said, "My name's on the envelope." And it's not that she hadn't been welcome before but that kind of raised the bar for her to feel more welcome. And so it's just taking I think in my experiences that, I know I said that some things I take for granted because just as I feel like I work in a great place and I sometimes maybe don't notice that it's different than it might be somewhere else. But for those type things, I really when something like that happens I try to go back to make sure the person knows; because I think that person will be more aware even it's not, they're out in the community so it might not be more aware in being inclusive in writing the envelopes because they obviously already did that but they'll know that their efforts were noticed and I think be more mindful of that when involved in future situations.

KG: What supports your develop of a positive identity as a lesbian school administrator within your school district what supported that?

Brittany: Probably the biggest support in all of that is just the reception I've gotten from just being able to be myself. Probably if I had had negative experiences, I would have to think that I wouldn't be as open when I came here. Or because I have transitioned from different schools within the district, I always had the opportunity to be less open at the next school because they don't know any different. Yes, they might know that I have a non-traditional relationship and I have children; but my day to day interactions could really be significantly different and how much I talk or don't talk about my family. So I think it's really been the people around me that have been the biggest support and continue to be.

KG: Have there been challenges for you?

Brittany: Only place I've experienced a challenge with my lifestyle has been the church outside of my work - so none nothing within the context of my work.

KG: Did you stay in that church?

Brittany: We had been going there for almost 3 years; started out as a small church and became really big and all the sudden. The reason we left was because we wanted to have our child dedicated; and it was just a dedication and it wasn't even a baptism. We sit out there as potential mothers for a while

and [Kelly] had seen this happen every year on Mother's Day; and it's the time – [our daughter] is here, Mother's Day is approaching. [Kelly] fills out this questionnaire you have to fill out to be able to do this; and of course pours her heart out - she's never felt so connected to a church, blah blah blah. There's probably going to be like thirty families do that on that day; and then it's very informal - it's like just stand up there and say we're going to do our very best raising this child. It's not even a formal baptism. So I get the call and I notice, you had to go for like a thirty minute meeting to be able to participate because it's more about knowing you're going to come up during this song and you're going to enter this way - more like logistics. And I notice that the time they invite us in for is not one of the stated times that were offered for people to come for classes; so I inferred through that different timing that it was going to be more of a personal conversation - indeed it was. And they basically said they could not support our way of life in the church and just went on and on about the only way for us to go and be a part of that church and be able to stand up there with [our daughter] would be to move to a stage of celibacy for more than a year and that we would have coach that we would have to call once a week to say (laugh), "Oh yeah, we've been holy this week and not physical." So anyway and then he the associate pastor went on to say tell us about his gay friend in California who now has AIDS. It was just like a big mess; and basically we ended the meeting and said, "Well this is not going to be a place where you will see us in the future. Thank you for your contributions you made on our spiritual journey. We have to take a different path at this point." And then they said, "Well we can't imagine a more safe place for your daughter to worship in the metro area." And I was like, "I can't, I don't know what that place is right now but we will find a safer place." So yeah that has been the only ouch that we have really encountered. So I know that that was really hurtful when that happened. So I think if I had, I mean it didn't cause me to change my viewpoints about churches because I knew there were churches out there that kind of get it, it's about my relationship with God and not about them judging. And so we have a church that we're incredibly happy with and go to. And our family actually, there's actually a negative encounter there - I know we're not supposed to be talking about churches but... So we went to this church United Methodist Church and it's in Maplewood. The pastor heard about our story with the other church and came to me and said - this church was just starting – "We're starting a new church. I just want you to know that that was really not what I think the experience should have been like for you and your family. So if you'll give our church a chance, we would love to baptize your daughter." So here we go - this new church starts, we start going the second Sunday. And then we wait to get [our daughter] baptized until I don't know like a year later because we wanted to just be a part of the church. And sure enough, he kept saying "When are we going to baptize [your daughter]?" So that was a really, really big risk for him to take as a new church that he's going to encourage our

nontraditional family to get up there, but anyway we did. And we felt so included and a lot of people from my work came and they had a baptismal party. And all this, so that's another point of celebration on there is that they hosted a celebration, a baptismal celebration for [our daughter] and our family because they knew about the past story. So they really wanted to make it special; and it was actually work people from my last school who hosted that. So anyway on this particular Sunday that they're doing the baptism, there is a church that is kind of firing up in the city and they were just going around to different churches to kind of like see what's around them. So they had a group of like ten people visiting; as [our daughter] is getting baptized, they stand up and walk out during the baptism. And [a gay administrator in my district], my friend and colleague from my last school, who is there, of course he gets up and follows them right out and is like, "Excuse me. Can I just ask why you're leaving?" And they just held up the Bible. I never talked with the pastor about it; he actually emailed us and said, "I had so much wonderful feedback on [your daughter] being baptized and our decision to do this. And I just want you to know that I don't want you to worry about that. I want you to know that so many people are happy that our church..." Because I think he knew that I knew that those people walked out. But then like a year later, we happened to not be a church and he sent me an email and he's like, "I know you weren't there today but you've got to listen to this sermon that I talked about [your daughter]." And he said how just like the decision to baptize her really changed the face of the church in causing it to be like a formally more open church. And that her name isn't \*\*\* by chance. And I mean it was just, actually we were in the car on our computer listening to this sermon after the fact just crying; because I feel like it's definitely not our family or [our daughter] that has changed that church by any means, it was their risk to embrace our family. And now there are a lot more people who are, who have a sexual orientation the same sexual orientation that we do go there; and I think it's just safe place to worship. So for that, I'm just so happy for the church that it has embraced everyone and not been exclusive. And I think that public decision to baptize and the conversation around that has caused more people to come there because they took that risk. So it's another one of those things - it's not about my family, it's about my family being in a place where someone took that chance because it could have been detrimental. I really am a believer that everything happens for a reason – hurtful, celebration or either way. I just think when you take time to look backwards, it's like I'm so glad we ended up there and it sucked, that experience sucked.

KG: Have there been stresses associated with coming out at work? Have you experienced any stress related to that? Emotional stress?

Brittany: No, I think I was just so naïve that really honestly I was so naïve that I didn't even know what to be stressed about. I probably stressed other

people out about it. Like I told you I had that teaching partner who was from a different generation and she's going, "What are you doing?" (laugh) I was just like, "I don't know." I really was I just say naïve and it was such a blessing that I was naïve about it; because had I maybe heard a lot of negative stories and experiences, it might have caused me to not put myself out there. I was just really young; and the only person I had heard from was my mom who had said, "Don't you dare tell anyone in your professional community about your life." And I was like, "Oh watch this!" I know if I move forward to go to a different district, I won't work in a place that that will cause me to be stressed about being myself. Now that I have this gift of being able to be myself, I'm not giving that up for anything - that's at the top of my list.

KG: What are some of the hidden rules that you're expected to follow as a lesbian school administrator?

Brittany: At one point our HR person was asked, "So why do you hire so many gay people?" And I think [Kelly] and I were talking about that and she's like, "It's no secret we just work harder because we're always trying to compensate. We don't want to give anyone any room to be judgmental about our performance or our professional life." And I do I think at first I did do that; but I'm a type A person. So it's hard to know did I do it because I wanted to show them and be a representative like we talked about earlier. I feel a lot of pressure - if I choose to think about it, about being the only lesbian person that someone knows and being their representative for the whole group. So I think that the hidden rule is not given to me by anyone else but myself and that's to work hard. But it's another one of those things that's really hard to separate out - maybe that's just who I am as a type A person who's always pushing myself.

KG: Does the act of constantly coming out or interjecting things about your family to signal to people who you are, to share does that affect you emotionally?

Brittany: I think I just was living in a life that I had been living not taking it for granted; but I have actually been overjoyed since I met with you last time thinking about all the things that I don't have to think about and how blessed I am. And I actually have debriefed with a couple of people about that and just saying what a gift. It's cost me. I haven't been emotional about it recently up until you and I met; but it's really caused me over the last couple of weeks to be like overjoyed just that I have this support system, network opportunity, climate in which to work. Because it seems like all the questions that you've asked me, it's probably not the norm. And maybe even just because I work in [this district] which is more open... People around that like I would never go around and say, "We hire gay people" to anyone; but people will bring it up to me like, "Oh your

district's pretty open. Well you have the largest number working there." People will make comments like that to me; so I don't even, I can't even imagine what it would be like to go work somewhere that didn't have other people in similar positions who were maybe out.

KG: So if this is an open place and you've found that you've been very supported, why don't they include sexual orientation in their anti-discrimination policy?

Brittany: I don't know what the Board's hang up is on that; I know it comes back to the board pretty much on an annual basis. And I'd have to say that that's disappointing to me. Maybe someone or a couple of people on there who just aren't quite there yet - I don't really know. But it hasn't impacted me that much. I thought about it and I'm disappointed by it; but it hasn't impacted me significantly because whether they include it or not, I feel safe. In our strategic plan, all staff members, students will feel valued, will feel safe, will feel... They'll work in an environment that is free of hate, that's tolerant, that's... So I think even though it's not written in that formal anti-discrimination policy, I don't feel like I'm impacted by that in my day to day. It's not like I've had an incident taken it to them and they've said, "Well sorry, we're not..." It does baffle me that they haven't made that decision given just the people who work in the district; and I just don't know what keeps it from, keeps them from really turning the corner on it. Maybe if I felt like I wasn't supported it would be a bigger deal to me. And I'm hoping that the students at the high school level, middle school level, that if they are having any incidents as a result of their sexual orientation, I'm having trust in my colleagues that they're addressing it you know even if it's written in there or not. I feel like administratively, we're being supported. I can't speak on specific issues; I just know if I look at who's around me that I think the district is supportive of the adults that work here.

### Interview Three

KG: What does it mean to be a school administrator that identifies as lesbian - what does it mean to you?

Brittany: It means that I get to bring who I am in myself to my work every day; I get to bring who I am at work home. So it's just all meshed together. I don't know it's hard - I was thinking that I don't know what it's like to not be a lesbian as a school... I wasn't a school administrator without being a lesbian; so really I just can't separate it out. And I think the big meaning of it all is that I get to be authentic in my work every day.

KG: The principal here, does that person accept? Know?

- Brittany: I probably haven't said much just because it's a nonissue - even when I wasn't working here as assistant principal, she celebrated our kids. Knowing [Kelly]'s pregnant, and she's like "oh" and when I transitioned here to take the job, she's like "Make sure you take time off even though it's in the first month of starting up here" and just incredibly supportive. And so probably I haven't said a thing about her because she is so supportive it just isn't...
- KG: What strengths does identifying as a lesbian give you when working, well when you were in your old position working with students in your capacity as a school administrator?
- Brittany: The necessity to recognize everyone for their individuality and honor who they are, who their family is. And try to look at how what they bring to the table might impact them in their relationships with peers, in their relationships with, like teacher to student relationships. And I think just making sure that we as the adults in the school as well as the children are aware of diversity that it exists - that it's important and imperative to celebrate each other and highlight our differences.
- KG: What about with families?
- Brittany: It's helped me to look through the lens of "Okay who is this family? What makes them unique or what do they bring to the table we might need to be aware of in our work with them?" So just heightened awareness.
- KG: What strengths does identifying as lesbian give you when working with staff in your capacity as a school administrator?
- Brittany: The awareness to look at their children and their classrooms and their colleagues as individuals. And I have a lot of emphasis in my leadership in focusing on community building and a common thread in that community building is recognizing the strengths of the people around you even though they might be different from yours - personal and professional.
- KG: What about with colleagues or people above you?
- Brittany: Maybe raising their awareness, and if they know about my family situation, then we have open relationship about that then maybe they are more aware on a personal level and a professional level. I think no matter which group it is - whether it's people who are my peers, people who are families of the school, students of the school or people who are my supervisors - I think maybe them knowing about my life raises their awareness and causes them to think and be more conscious of that in their work, personally and professionally. For example, the principal here, she's talked to me about this - this isn't a story about how it's so much impacted



her; but just her work with me has impacted her husband's thinking. Because he has not been around anyone who identified as lesbian really - he had only been a part of hearing about stereotypes and all that and just his understanding. He was like, "Wow, they're just a relationship like ours and I don't think of that when I see them." So maybe it was a personal experience that has changed his perception of things; but I can't, I don't know, no one's really told me stories about how my direct work with them has impacted their thinking.

KG: How do you see yourself as an advocate or not an advocate for gay and lesbian issues at the district level are you comfortable going there? Non-discrimination partner benefits, just inclusiveness, do you feel like you're at point or do you feel comfortable living in the advocacy world?

Brittany: I would definitely do that with the partner benefits piece. I guess selfishly it hasn't been something that I've needed - actually [Kelly]'s work has partner benefits so I'm on her insurance. But if it was a case where probably it was something in my personal life that she was out of a job, I would go to have that conversation not being worried that it was going to be a job threat or that it was going to impact their thinking of me down the line. I haven't thought about being an advocate more so beyond my own needs which... But I definitely would be comfortable, I'd be comfortable doing that. The non-discrimination piece I haven't thought about going there because mostly it's been the students who've taken it to the board. I have thought more about that in our conversations about if I am feeling so supportive then why hasn't that happened - so I don't quite have resolve with it yet. I feel so safe in my everyday work; and I feel not as though I'm not discriminated against but it has sparked my thinking a little bit about is there an illusion there at all (laugh).

KG: And do you think there's an illusion or you haven't gotten there yet?

Brittany: I haven't gotten there yet; but I don't think so because I feel like all the different layers - families, board, my supervisors - they're all incredibly supportive, my colleagues. But it's just the why - just wanting to know more about... I really don't think it's an illusion because I just have too many examples for it to be by chance; but I've just been thinking more about like wanting to know the why - tell me, just tell me more about why we haven't put that in there, I'm curious.

KG: Professional grew up in [this district]. Do you think that matters that makes a difference as opposed to someone that is moving into the district professionally after being somewhere else with a gay or lesbian identity?

Brittany: Yeah, I think it makes a difference. I'm in my 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> year here; and I have all these examples like I've just said that have caused me to really

believe this is a safe place to work. And I think for me to tell someone, that might have some merit who's coming in who identifies as gay or lesbian; but I think to experience it is always more powerful than to just hear it. So I think I do have a higher probably level of trust and more examples to say, "Yes, I feel incredibly supported" then someone who might be coming in. I'm trying to think about any of my peers who might have been in that situation where they came in - a lot of the people have been here. But I don't know, I would hope that their understanding of who maybe works in this school district that identifies as gay or lesbian; and that that would help them feel more safe. Like versus myself, if I transitioned to a new school district and I didn't know anyone there who had been there over time that identified as gay or lesbian and I had no idea how anyone around them in my new environment felt about it, that would definitely be way different than I think going somewhere where there were people that were out and were viewed as a part of the district you know fully.

KG: What challenges does identify as lesbian present when working with all of those populations?

Brittany: Fortunately for me at this point, it hasn't.

KG: Why do you think it hasn't?

Brittany: I think a common thread in all of our conversations together has just been around the willingness to put it out there and just say this is who I am. And I shared before that I really think that by not fully sharing who we are that it causes people to question more, it causes it to be more mysterious. And so I think just them knowing has been the critical piece that's helped it to unfold positively.

KG: How does it make you feel when people receive you positively, when they affirm who you are?

Brittany: Amazing - it's a gift. That it just validates, it validates my decision to be myself whether I'm here, whether I'm in [my community], whether I'm downtown - it just it validates my decision to do that and causes me to continue to do that. I say it's a gift but I really think that's what we should all be doing. But I'm choosing to view it as a gift because I know not everyone has had that positive reception; but I think it's what we should all be doing with each other every day whether it's that I identify as lesbian or someone else identifies as whatever.

KG: Does it not frustrate you but does it bother you at all that people aren't comfortable living out in this district or wherever?

- Brittany: I hurt more for them. Because we have talked about just within this generation, I feel like that is because the truth of the matter is if I would have happened to be in a different generation, I might not be living exactly as I'm living today. So I think I'm more frustrated with people around them who have caused them to think that they can't live out; and I'm more hurt for those people who have to carry that with them of not being able to be themselves.
- KG: I mean does it hurt the acceptance that people don't feel comfortable living out even though everyone around them knows?
- Brittany: I think so because people have said to me before that when someone chooses not to share then they think that we're not comfortable with it, they being the person who identifies as gay or lesbian which causes other people to be uncomfortable with it which perpetuates the mystery or the it must not be right if they're not willing to talk about it or all those different kinds of belief pieces.
- KG: Have you seen in your 11 years here as you've lived more out other people taking your lead either staff or administrators?
- Brittany: [Yes], when I was at my last school we hired someone who was gay, who is gay. And I think because of the tone in the building that we were both, I mean it's hard telling, he's certainly from our generation but I don't know if he would have been out in a building where there weren't people who identified as gay or lesbian speaking out about not necessarily being an advocate but just being themselves. I don't know if he would have done that so quickly. So I think that that created a model that the building was safe - if the assistant principal and principal were doing it, that then it caused the other people to be okay with being more themselves maybe sooner than they would have in another environment.
- KG: Do you think it's different for men then it is for women in education who identify as gay or lesbian to live out?
- Brittany: I think it depends on the level that they're teaching. Like at the elementary level, I don't think it's as well maybe I don't know. I think it's harder at the high school level - I just think that, I don't really know why I think that except that it seems to be that in general lesbians are more accepted. And that's like, I don't have any data to show that, I haven't done any reading about it just my life experiences and conversations with people. The data would tell me that people think being a lesbian, well that's cool but the guys think that guys are - that's not a positive thing. And so I would just wonder that and I have guys at the high school who are assistants and I haven't had conversations with them about how their experience has impacted their - it's totally just my looking at it. And

probably looking at, I don't think [a gay administrator in the district] had any controversy like as being a principal at the elementary level.

KG: What about parents, family comfort with having a male administrator who identifies as gay?

Brittany: In my 3 years of working with [another gay administrator], I can't recall any experiences that were negative in terms of his sexuality. I don't know if there's a difference because he had been in education a long time - he came with this huge positive reputation. So how did that help him? You can't separate that out versus if he had been in his early years. He was in like his last few years in education; so all that coming with him maybe helped people just like glaze over any understanding or inkling they might have had about his sexuality before he decided to live more out.

KG: If you had had an experience like you had in your first church with the situation with [our daughter] and the dedication you shared last time, if you had had that type of experience in this school district how would that have changed your path?

Brittany: I think it would have had the potential to change it significantly. I might not still be working here because... It's hard telling because that was our experience at the church - it wasn't like we continued to go there and be a part of that and embrace something we didn't really believe in. So I don't know, it might have changed my professional path in terms of not being a part of this school district anymore or it might have changed in the fact that I might have remained a part of it but been more private. It might have reinforced my mother's theory of never telling anybody (laugh). So one of the things that has happened through this and we've processed this, I've really reflected back on all those people that were huge supporters in the beginning. And how the role they played in setting this up to be successful; and how I'm going to convey to them, how I'm going to get the message across to them that I appreciate that. And that I know they were risk takers and have contributed to me being able to be myself each and every day.

KG: Is that something you take for granted or have taken for granted?

Brittany: I don't take it for granted because I told people I know what a gift it is; but on a day to day scale, it probably it just is life here. It's one of those things that maybe if I had moved to a new district go like, "oh my gosh" because you don't know what you've got until you've got something differently.

KG: Do you think that if you met resistance at all and it wasn't maybe blatant but it wasn't overt but maybe covert where there wasn't an opening there for a professional relationship or a more in depth relationship would you

continue to push in that direction or has that happened looking back or would you back off and say you know I'll concentrate my efforts here?

Brittany: I think probably I would continue to push in a tiny way; just because I always think maybe if they had more understanding or maybe they just don't have all the information. I'm going to demonstrate to them that this is a positive relationship I'm in.

KG: Is that where the work is to be done? Is that is that the harder work? Is that where the more needed work are those relationships?

Brittany: I think it's really important work. As you've asked this, I feel safe like I have a lot of allies; so I would push gently. But I don't know if I had allies that caused me even though I do try to look at life like the glass is half full, I can't take away the power of the allies that I have. In just having that awareness myself, it causes me to be able to move forward.

KG: How much further can you go in the way you're living as far as you talk about pushing forward? What's the next step to that?

Brittany: Thinking about how I can be helpful to other people like what you talked about in terms of the advocacy and asking the questions and...

KG: Does that make you more vulnerable if you do that?

Brittany: I think that you have to plan out how you would ask those questions and you have to be thoughtful in your approach and your delivery of whatever that might be. But it would be taking a risk; and I would have to frame it around being okay with whatever the outcome is. But just doing it for more, like I said, more for other people - my whole journey up until now has been more about me, my life, my family; but maybe I need to think about how I can extend it to involve impacting others.

KG: When you entered the district and how it all came about has that been more of a haphazard or has that been planned out for you as well? Have you thought about it at all?

Brittany: No, I haven't thought about it and I haven't. It was just more about when [Kelly] gave me a ring and I go to school someone notices; and I'm just like, "Oh yeah." "Are you all going to have a ceremony?" "Yeah." It's just like living moment by moment as opposed to strategic planning. I don't know, it's hard to say if I moved to a new district would my life be more strategically planned at that point because I would guess that if I moved to a new district it would be an administrative position so the more eyes on you as opposed to going there as a teacher and being able to test the waters around me.

- KG: How much would your life have to change though to go back in the closet to take a position?
- Brittany: I wouldn't. I would have to figure out if they were a school or a learning community in a district that celebrated valued differences and allow people to be themselves - whatever that means for that individual. It would really take some investigation on my part. I'm looking at and talking to people who have experienced it, who are experiencing it.
- KG: Is there anything I need to know that I don't know? Anything that, anything that you want to make sure is part of this process that hasn't that we haven't talked about or you feel like needs to be heard?
- Brittany: I guess the power that I've been given to be myself has depended so much on the people around me and those initial responses.
- KG: Have you been given it or have you taken it?
- Brittany: Combination - it was available so I ran with it. I think when I see the door open, then I have definitely walked through it. So there are people who have a lot of doors open that maybe choose not to do that consciously or unconsciously; but I think the main thing is I want to know the people around me have been such an incredible support. And they've caused me to continue to be able to march forward and just be myself everyday, which is what every single person I think deserves. And when in this school or my last school or the school I might be in in the future, that's one of the things I really want to make sure happens for the adults in the building and the kids in the building and the families that are part of the building.
- KG: Do you think heterosexism and homophobia in this district is alive and well and overt or do you think that it's alive and well and gone underground or do you think it's a non issue?
- Brittany: I would like to say it's a nonissue, but I think that would be too positive of me. If I'm looking at all levels because there have I would think that there are people out in the community and even people who work around the district who it's not a part of their belief system or they don't approve of it; but if it is out there, it's definitely underground because I haven't had any in 10 years, 10 plus years any experiences.